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Editorial: Towards an Archaeology of Television

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EDITORIAL

TOWARDS AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF TELEVISION

Over the last few years, 'media archaeology' has evolved from a marginal topic to an academic approach *en vogue*. Under its banner, conferences and publications bring together scholars from different disciplines who, revisiting the canon of media history and theory, emphasize the necessity for renewed historiographical narratives. Despite, or maybe because of profuse debates, media archaeology remains a loosely defined playground for researchers working at the intersection of history and theory. Far from offering uniform principles or constituting a homogeneous field, its prominent authors – Friedrich Kittler and Wolfgang Ernst, Siegfried Zielinski, Jussi Parikka and Erkki Huhtamo, to name just a few – distinguish themselves by their heterogeneity regarding methodology and theoretical focus. Friedrich Kittler, often called the 'father' of media archaeology, has himself confessed that "as an approach to the social history of technical media it took me a long time to understand what the term media archaeology means."¹

A general summary of the definition and objectives of media archaeology is thus an ingrate enterprise and bears the risk of reductionism since it seems impossible to reflect the totality of such a heterogeneous field. As Simone Natale recently observed in a review of media archaeological publications, "given the varied approaches taken by scholars who worked under this label and the different ways it has been defined, providing a clear and definite account of media archaeology is a rather difficult task."² The tension emerging from the creative openness of such a 'traveling discipline'³ is reflected in Jussi Parikka's and Erkki Huhtamo's 2011 volume *Media Archaeology. Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, and appears even more strongly in Parikka's 2012 publication *What is Media Archaeology?*⁴ Both volumes aim at offering a historiographical overview of media archaeological scholarship while introducing new research, thus simultaneously delimiting and widening the field. As the authors show, the authoritative question *What is Media Archaeology?* cannot be answered with a single phrase but finds its response in a 'cartography'⁵ tracing multiple influences and directions. Accordingly, the studies brought together in *Media Archaeology. Approaches, Applications, and Implications* discuss (almost) everything from Sigmund Freud's Wunderblock to Japanese 'Baby Talkies,' from pre-cinematic toys to video games.

The multiplicity at the heart of media archaeological scholarship reflects the broad spectrum of work that enriches the approach. While Michel Foucault's archaeology of knowledge constitutes a major source of inspiration, other (media) historians such as Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Giedion, or Aby Warburg were, according to Huhtamo and Parikka, "in some ways 'media archaeologists' *avant la lettre*."⁶ Interdisciplinary and diverse, media archaeological approaches share with this research a common interest for non-linear and dynamic historical narratives. More recently, media historians working on the early histories of cinema, television, and other mass media have testified of affinities with media archaeology without directly claiming its heritage. Contributing to what could be termed an 'archaeology of the new,' Carol Marvin, Tom Gunning, Lisa Gitelman and others put into historical perspective ever repeated claims about yet another media 'revolution.'⁷ Within Film Studies, the concept of 'dispositif' – (re-)defined as a network of technologies, practices, and discourses – has helped

1 John Armitage, "From Discourse Networks to Cultural Mathematics. An Interview with Friedrich A. Kittler," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, No. 7–8, 2006, p. 32.

2 Simone Natale, "Understanding Media Archaeology," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 37, No. 3, 2012, p. 523.

3 Jussi Parikka and Erkki Huhtamo borrow this notion from Mieke Bal, in Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, eds., *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, University of California Press, 2011, p. 3.

4 Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?*, Polity, 2012.

5 "Introduction. An Archaeology of Media Archaeology", in Huhtamo and Parikka, eds., *Media Archaeology*, p. 3.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

7 Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, 1988; Tom Gunning, "Re-Newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century," *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*, David Thorburn, Henry Jenkins, and Brad Seawell, eds., MIT Press, 2004, 39–60; Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*, MIT Press, 2008; Andreas Fickers, "Konservative Medienrevolutionen. Überlegungen zu einer Genealogie des Medienwandels," in *Theorien des Medienwandels*, Susanne Kinnebrock, Christian Schwarzenegger, Thomas Birkner, eds., Herbert von Halem Verlag, 2015, pp. 259–279.

establish yet another body of archaeological scholarship. Embracing the material, semantic, and symbolic dimensions of cinema, the notion of *dispositif* stresses the fact that media have a physical and an imaginary existence and allows comprehending media objects, whether concrete or fictional, in their various modes of existence.⁸

The theoretical eclecticism of media archaeological works has not been seen as a weakness or limitation though, but on the contrary, has been celebrated as a specific strength. In his *Deep Time of Media*, Siegfried Zielinski advocates an 'an-archic' – that is leaderless – historical research embracing media independently of their economic, social or aesthetic success.⁹ The unearthing of alternative histories is a central motivation behind many media archaeological investigations and contributes to the decentering of more traditional history focused on single (mass) media. It also stimulates the re-reading of the contemporary media landscape through the lenses of the past's abundance. As Zielinski writes, "The goal is to uncover dynamic moments in the media-archaeological record that abound and revel in heterogeneity and, in this way, enter into a relationship of tension with various present-day moments, relativize them, and render them more decisive."¹⁰

Participating in the uncovering of alternative histories is what could be termed the 'archaeology of imaginary media.' Unearthing dreamed, unfinished or inexistent machines as well as the technological imaginaries of realized devices, this archaeological strand articulates, as Eric Kluitenberg writes, "a highly complex field of signification and determination that tends to blur the boundaries between technological imaginaries and actual technological development."¹¹ Studies into imaginary media exploit the double signification of innovation as an imaginary act *and* an engineering feat and show how both realms – the 'real' and the 'imaginary' – are not mutually exclusive but porous and interdependent.

Probably the most prominent representatives of media archaeological research – Friedrich Kittler and Wolfgang Ernst – advocate a 'materialist' approach, representing as Ernst has recently stated, the 'hard side'¹² of media archaeology. Although Kittler insisted on the differences between his own and Ernst' research,¹³ the authors share similar concerns and encourage a shift away from texts and interpretations – the traditional matter of humanities – to focus on 'hardware' and machines. Both understand media archaeology as an alternative to socially centered cultural studies and text-based approaches: technological things, defined as non-human agents, create meaning and thus historical agency, which the archaeologist uncovers. The attention brought to the hardware raises questions for an understanding of culture based not on human interaction, but on multiple technological objects and their circuits.¹⁴

Yet despite their affinity for questions of materiality or 'thingness' of media technologies, many media archaeological studies in the tradition of the Kittler-school remain within the realm of literary or semiotic approaches and somehow caught within the methodological paradigm of discourse analysis. This is why some scholars recently have argued for a hands-on and experimental approach to media history, inspired by the method of re-enactment and driven by the desire to produce experimental knowledge regarding past media usages and practices. In 'thinkering' with old media technologies, they argue, scholars could go beyond the 'hermeneutics of astonishment' that characterize a lot of media archaeological projects and instead co-construct their epistemic objects in direct interaction with them.¹⁵

8 See François Albera and Maria Tortajada, eds., *Cinema beyond Film. Media Epistemology in the Modern Era* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press), 2010.

9 Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, MIT Press, 2006.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 11

11 Eric Kluitenberg, "On the Archaeology of Imaginary Media," in *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, eds., University of California Press, 2011, 48–69.

12 <http://amodern.net/article/ernst-media-history/>

13 Armitage, "From Discourse Networks to Cultural Mathematics", 32.

14 Wolfgang Ernst, "Media Archaeography. Method and Machine versus History and Narrative of Media," in *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, eds., University of California Press, 2011, 239–55.

15 Andreas Fickers, Annie van den Oever, "Experimental Media Archaeology. A Plea for New Directions", in Annie van den Oever, ed., *Technel/Technology. Researching Cinema and Media Technologies, their Development, Use and Impact*, Amsterdam University Press, 2013, pp. 272–278; Andreas Fickers, "Hands-on! Plädoyer für eine experimentelle Medienarchäologie," in *Technikgeschichte*, Vol. 82, Issue 1, 2015, pp. 67–85.

1 Why an Archaeology of TV?

If media archaeological scholarship is thus characterized by diversified methodological approaches and theoretical references, it most often displays a marked interest for media in their broadest definition. Instead of writing the history of one particular communication technology, media archaeology aims at decompartmentalizing history and prioritizes intertwined and interdependent narratives. Writing against teleological narratives of successful communication technologies, the media archaeologist privileges ‘fortuitous finds’¹⁶ that complicate rather than smoothen his account.

In light of this lowest common denominator of media archaeological scholarship as a method for linking a broad ensemble of media technologies and practices, a *television archaeology* seems counter-intuitive. If the archaeologist claims to excavate forgotten devices, why suggest an archaeology of one of the most important and vivid mass media? Clearly a ‘winner’ in media history, how can television fit into an ‘anarchic’ reading of media technologies? Or, to put it otherwise, what can the television historian take from an approach that focuses on *marginal* machines as *physical* entities, instead of analyzing mass distributed programs? And, finally, what and how can an archaeology of TV contribute to the broader media archaeology?

Each of the articles brought together in this issue suggests a slightly different answer to these questions. Widening television’s history to less reviewed or even unknown objects, images and practices, and combining historical research with innovative methodological and theoretical perspectives, the papers demonstrate the fruitful incorporation of media archaeological theory into historical scholarship on television. The individual case studies of various historical events, practices, objects and discourses allow mapping out several directions for archaeological research of TV’s history and encourage alternative paths for explorations into hidden genealogies of a (all-too) familiar media.

First, the archaeological approach invites us to rethink common historiographical narratives by reflecting on historical complexities that question the linearity and straightforwardness of many historiographical accounts. Recently, web-based technologies and their consequences on TV’s cultural forms and technologies have fostered a description of TV history as a linear development from the box in the corner to a multifaceted system of platforms and uses. The following alternative genealogies of interactive, stereoscopic, and participative television revise this all-too simple narrative.

Alison Gazzard presents an archaeology of convergence TV starting in the 1970s–1980s with developments in the field of microprocessing. As she demonstrates, the connectivity of today’s smart TV was preceded by information networks such as the British Teletext system and new telesoftware. These systems, that were most often directly integrated into the television set, provided audiences with additional, partly interactive content on their television screen before the digital age.

Ilkin Mehrabov’s piece investigates an unsuccessful European collaboration that pursued the goal of creating a 3-D TV system. Based on interviews with members of the project, Mehrabov reflects upon the project’s imagined goals and concrete results, and interrogates the claimed ‘newness’ of a device for stereoscopic vision from a historical perspective. Yet another attempt to transcend bi-dimensional representations, the 3DTV-project finally integrated experiments on holographic projection, which were presented by one member as the “ultimate 3-D viewing’ experience.”

Susan Aasman and Tom Slootweg propose a study of two ‘non-conformist’ – in reference to Zielinski’s work, we might say ‘anarchist’ – Dutch television productions, the youth program *Neon* and Ed van der Elsken’s Super-8 movies documenting his family live. Made in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the two productions sought to encourage audience participation and access to media practice. Both experiments were eventually very short-lived and, as the authors conclude, failed to “bring about a democratic media revolution.” From a media archaeological perspective, however, they represent a telling example of the manifold histories located at the fringes of institutional public service and its spectatorial and economic model.

¹⁶ Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media*, p. 13.

Secondly, the media archaeological perspective invites us to turn our gaze to television's technological and social imaginaries and its discursive construction. Doron Galili and Ghislain Thibault both study metaphoric uses and fictional stories of television and its components. Galili does so for the early 20th century and Thibault for the digital age. Doron Galili analyses three televisual systems at the heart of three *Tom Swift* novels published in 1914, 1928 and 1933, respectively. The 'photo telephone,' the 'talking picture' broadcast, and the 'television detector' each constitute extravagant televisual devices introduced to us through the novel's narrative about the (successful) boy-inventor. Much more than just anecdotic machines expressing a (fictional) writer's fantasy, the three 'TVs' reveal the intermedial links between television and contemporary media – radio, sound film, X-rays, in particular – that are constitutive of television's history.

Following the 'recurrent topoi' of 'streaming,' Ghislain Thibault brings to the fore an occulted genealogy of 'aqueous' metaphors that links television to other media, from telegraphy to the Internet. Through a careful reading of these metaphors and their comparison with the actual technological system they describe, Thibault shows that digital media remediate older features of mass media while simultaneously pretending novelty. While previous uses of the metaphors 'flow,' 'conduits' and 'channels' pointed to the passivity of mass audience, the contemporary notion of 'streaming' apparently implies an active user in control. Bringing to the fore the politics of imaginary media, Thibault however shows us that the regulation and monitoring of flows is key to understanding what streaming hides behind its enthusiastic discourse about renewed freedom for television audiences.

A third path is taken by those authors whose papers understand media archaeology as an invitation for experimenting with new methods of historical research. Here, the innovative potential of media archaeology translates directly into the historian's working processes and his or her creative shaping of historical narratives. In his paper, Phil Ellis recounts his personal experience of doing media archaeology based on the method of re-enactment. Interested in John Logie Baird's 1930 broadcast of *The Man with the Flower in his Mouth*, Ellis undertakes 'traditional' research in the BBC's written archives as well as on-location scouting at 133 Long Acre, London, to finally reconstitute the original performance as artistic practice. In his experiment, the televisual archive becomes a reservoir for artistic appropriation, and the technological history circulates beyond the historians' guild.

A similar hands-on, ears-on, or an integral sensual approach towards media technologies is proposed by Amanda Murphy, Rowan Aust, Vanessa Jackson and John Ellis in their video essay on 16mm film editing for television uses. Produced within the ADAPT-project *Researching the history of television production technology*, the 20-minute film documents the reunion of two editors and his assistant – Oliver White and Dawn Trotman – in front of their former editing table. The filming of their encounter as past colleagues as well as the rediscovery of their old work place opens up a historical narrative about production practices not available through texts and written archives.

Adam Hulbert's piece "Without Latency: Cathode immersions and the neglected practice of xenocasting for television and radio" is a fine example of a rather experimental and artistic tradition in exploring past media technologies and practices. Based on a radio project in Sydney Australia, which remixed and rebroadcasted free-to-air television on a local radio station, Hulbert reflects on the concept of 'latency' as a temporal phenomenon that is deeply inscribed into media technologies and our perception of mediated reality. Inspired by Murray Schafers concept of 'schizophonia,' he challenges us to rethink the canonical equation of broadcasting as an experience of 'liveness' and 'immediacy' and invites us to understand the agencies of xenocasting as an experience of what Michel de Certeau had described as 'Wandersmänner:' an ad hoc assemblage of scattered semantic places and meanings.

A fourth path could be characterized as a 'dig where you stand' approach, characterizing media archaeological research that is interested in excavating 'forgotten' or 'lost' remains of a media past. As Ken Griffin demonstrates on the example of the Northern Irish current affair program *Counterpoint*, even flagship and long running television series can fall into oblivion by hazard, simply due to a shortage of surviving recordings of early editions. By testing the explanatory power of Wolfgang Ernst's concept of archaeography, Griffin critically reflects on the problem of physical and archival constraints that delimit the possibilities or impossibilities of doing media archaeological research in practice.

That these possibilities or impossibilities are also framed by the tools of online research such as OPACS and search facilities for databases or repositories, is the focus of the article by Jasmijn Van Gorp et al. By focusing on the example

of a new exploratory tool for media studies research called AVResearcherXL, enabling users to search, compare and visualize both metadata of Dutch public television and radio programmes and a large collection of digitized newspaper articles of the Dutch Royal Library, the authors argue that doing media archaeology in the digital age asks for a critical reflection on the design and logic of online digital databases. While a playful or associative use of data visualization tools can certainly provoke new questions for media archaeological research, the ambiguity and hidden algorithmic bias of such tools embed a potential danger for producing historical interpretations based on highly arbitrary or de-contextualized metadata settings.

2 Thoughts for Future (Television) Archaeologies

In their diversity and innovative force, the articles brought together in this issue translate the relevance of an archaeological approach of TV. They point to television's multiple pasts and its manifold connections with other media, be they imaginary or concrete, and suggest new paths of writing televisual history. However, our experience of putting together this issue of *VIEW* has also highlighted some of the difficulties of *doing* media archaeology.

First and foremost, the submissions answering our call for papers were less numerous than expected. While there certainly are various reasons for this, the relatively scarce response rate reflects a broader situation: so far, television historians have only shyly contributed to media archaeology. Most studies that could be classified as media archaeological work focus on the televisual utopias emerging from the 1870s on, contributing thus to an archaeology of TV as an imaginary media.¹⁷ With the exception of a few recent publications, this body of work does however not claim a direct affiliation with the media archaeological approach.¹⁸

This, in turn, reveals another concern at the core of media archaeology more broadly, namely the distinction between media archaeology, media history and new historicism. The boundaries between a media archaeological investigation and more 'common' television history are often vague, even unclear. Over the past two decades, television historiography in specific and media historiography more broadly have been analyzing popular and expert media discourses, technologies and practices, generally aiming at complexifying mono-medial narratives and criticizing all-too linear approaches. In this context, media archaeology runs the danger of being used as a blurry notion whose main function eventually consists in rebranding 'old' scholarship into 'new' research. Repeated criticisms by some media archaeologists towards the address of 'traditional' media historians could possibly be interpreted as part of a strategic rhetorical exercise in order to promote the difference and otherness of their approach – which is of course a well known process of disciplinary diversification and school building in the academic economy of attention. One would hardly find a cultural or media historian nowadays defending ideas of teleological processes of media development, and acknowledging phenomena of remediation and intermediality when studying the emergence of so-called new media has turned into a mantra of media historical scholarship.

What requires more serious attention in any further debate, though, between 'archaeologists' and 'historians' of media is the role of chronology in historical storytelling. Both historians and archaeologists are interested in studying discrete moments or events in time, thus describing specific enunciations of a past gone by. In interpreting these events, both historians and archaeologists have to put these concrete moments into a chronology, that is to establish an interpretative

17 For an extensive overview of televisual imaginaries, see André Lange's online project [here](#). For a discussion of various televisual utopias see William Uricchio's work, for instance "Television, Film and the Struggle for Media Identity," *Film History* 10, No. 2, 1998, p. 118–127; Alain Boillat has unearthed Kurt Lasswitz' television utopias in Alain Boillat, "Faire pour la vue ce que le téléphone fait pour l'ouïe. Rencontres entre l'image et la voix dans quelques anticipations de la télévision," in *La télévision du téléphonoscope à Youtube*, Mireille Berton and Anne-Katrin Weber, eds., Antipodes, 2009, 77–97; Jürgen E. Müller, "Tele-Vision als Vision: Einige Thesen zur intermedialen Vor- und Frühgeschichte des Fernsehens (Charles François Tiphaigne de la Roche und Albert Robida)," in *Autoren, Automaten, Audiovisionen: neue Ansätze der Medienästhetik und Tele-Semiotik*, Ernest W. B. Hess-Lüttich, eds., Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001, 187–208; and Jürgen E. Müller, "L'intermédialité, une Nouvelle Approche Interdisciplinaire: Perspectives Théoriques et Pratiques à l'exemple de la Vision de la Télévision," *Cinémas: Revue d'Etudes Cinématographiques* 10, No. 2–3, 2000, 105–134.

18 An exception constitutes the volume *La télévision du téléphonoscope à Youtube: pour une archéologie de l'audiovision*, Mireille Berton and Anne-Katrin Weber, eds., Antipodes, 2009; Anne-Katrin Weber, "Recording on Film, Transmitting by Signals. The Intermediate Film System and Television's Hybridity in the Interwar Period," *Grey Room* 56, Summer 2014, 6–33.

framework that contextualizes the event and specifies its relationships with both pre- and antedating events. Yet, while historians are mainly trained in putting events into a longer historical perspective, often by doing diachronic comparisons or by reflecting on the structural dimensions in which the singular historical event is embedded, media archaeologists tend to be interested in a synchronic historical perspective, aiming at describing the different and overlapping layers of history inscribed into this specific moment of time. While the diachronic perspective incorporates the inherent danger of producing linear or even teleological narratives, thereby neglecting the implicit openness of all historical development, synchronic studies are confronted with the danger of overemphasizing the newness of specific historical events and in messing up the potentiality of history with its actual manifestations.

Both media archaeological and media historical interpretations of past media technologies, contents, practices or discourses therefore require an explicit and critical reflection on how they construct chronologies. The implicit chronologies of synchronous or diachronic perspectives, parallel or deep histories or circular models of pre- and remediation intrinsically influence how the past is questioned and studied. A critical reflection on the implicit temporalities of chronological conceptions is key for both archaeological and historical approaches: they frame the construction of historical arguments and have a decisive impact on the narrative format of historical storytelling.

The question of *doing* media archaeology or history of television thus touches upon the relation between theory and practice and forces us to think about the tension between developing or applying conceptual frameworks and engaging with historical sources and archives. Authors such as Ernst or Parikka raise important questions on methodology and media theory, but are less involved in discussing the challenges of 'applied' historical and archival research. This focus on methodology bears the risk of producing self-referential or even autopoietic scholarship that only inadequately dialogues with the daily works of (television) historians. Here, a case study approach such as the one facilitated by this issue of *VIEW* offers the opportunity to think through the theory-history gap and suggest different bridges between 'traditional' research and media archaeological studies, eventually advocating for a 'pragmatic' approach to media archaeology.

Andreas Fickers and Anne-Katrin Weber

Biography

Andreas Fickers is professor of contemporary and digital history at the University of Luxembourg. He is Deputy Head of the Institute of History and Head of the Laboratory for Digital History at the Faculty of Language and Literature, Humanities, Arts and Education. He is involved in major European research networks ('Tensions of Europe Network,' 'European Television History Network') and is currently setting up a network for experimental media archaeology (together with Annie van den Oever / Groningen University). He is currently finishing the book *Communicating Europe: Technologies, Information, Events* (co-authored with Pascal Griset / Sorbonne) to be published in the Palgrave-McMillan series Making Europe (1850-2000). For more publications see: <http://luxembourg.academia.edu/AndreasFickers>.

Anne-Katrin Weber is a lecturer and post-doc researcher at the Department of Cinema Studies at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland. She recently completed her dissertation, where she analyses television in the interwar period from an archaeological perspective, and discusses in particular the shaping of the medium through its public display at exhibitions and fairs. She is the co-editor with Mireille Berton of *La télévision du Téléphonoscope à YouTube: Pour une archéologie de l'audiovision* (Antipodes, 2009) and the author of several articles about early television history. Her latest article in English was published in *Grey Room* 56 (2014). Her new research project explores the archaeology of digital TV from the 1960s onwards.