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# Experimental Media Archaeology: A Plea for New Directions

*Andreas Fickers and Annie van den Oever*

## Preamble

The history of media archaeology has been a history of discourse-oriented analysis. Friedrich Kittler, the intellectual father of media archaeology, inspired a focus on the materiality of the medium from the early 1980s onwards to lay bare the epistemological structures underpinning studies in the humanities.<sup>1</sup> While this tradition has produced interesting studies focusing on the discursive construction and symbolic meaning of different media technologies, the materiality of media technologies and the practices of use need more attention.<sup>2</sup> Media are widely acknowledged as utterly important in the formation of knowledge, cultures, and media-saturated everyday life, and urgently in need of further study. While media archaeology positively helped to constitute the field of media studies, and contributed considerably to the broader awareness of how important media are and have been in the past, we feel though that a further step is needed now in terms of studying the materiality of the medium to live up to the expectations raised. Instead of investing our energies in discursive enterprises, we opt for an investment in experimental media archaeology. Experimental media archaeology is inspired by the idea of historical re-enactment, acknowledging the historian's (the experimenter's) role as co-constructor of the epistemic object. Experimental media archaeology is driven by a desire to produce experimental knowledge regarding past media usages, developments, and practices. To do so, it will be practical as well as philosophical, empirical as well as theoretical, conceptual as well as experimental, drawing from psychology as well as sociology, ethnography as well as cultural anthropology, image theory as well as history. Lastly, experimental media archaeology has an archival drive; it aspires to use the immense collections of media apparatuses (*l'appareil de base*)<sup>3</sup> waiting in film and other archives for further research.

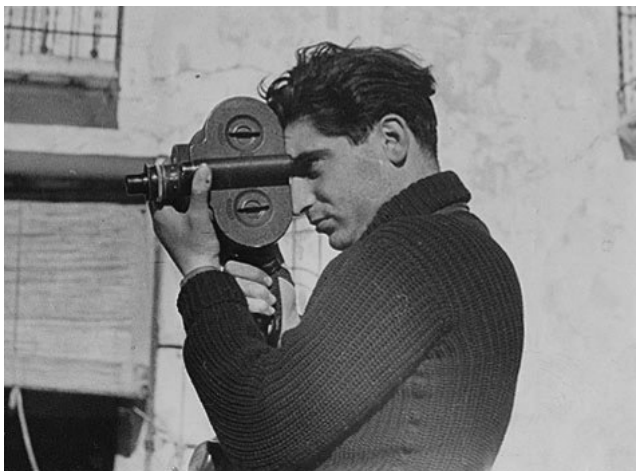
## Re-Enactment as Heuristic Methodology

Experimental media archaeology is inspired by the idea of historical re-enactment as a heuristic methodology. As such, it is well established in the field of experimental archaeology<sup>4</sup> and in the history of science.<sup>5</sup> The idea of re-enactment as a heuristic concept of historical understanding has been introduced by the historian and philosopher of history R.G. Collingwood in his seminal study “The Idea of History”:

Historical knowledge is the knowledge of what mind has done in the past, and at the same time it is the re-doing of this, the perpetuation of past acts in the present. Its object is therefore not a mere object, something outside the mind which knows it; it is an activity of thought, which can be known only in so far as the knowing mind re-enacts it and knows itself as doing so. To the historian, the activities whose history he is studying are not spectacles to be watched, but experiences to be lived through in his own mind; they are objective, or known to him, only because they are also subjective, or activities of his own.<sup>6</sup>

Acknowledging the informative role of re-enactments in the historian’s mind in the construction of her historical imagination, we propose to expand Collingwood’s idea of “experiencing history” in doing historical re-enactments in practice not only as “*Gedankenexperimente*.”<sup>7</sup> In engaging with the historical artifacts, 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. In doing experimental media archaeology, we want to plead for a hands-on, ears-on, or an integral sensual approach toward media technologies. As the French philosopher Michel Serres argued in *The Five Senses*, we need a “second tongue” in order to grasp the complex meaning of things. Using the example of wine-tasting, Serres shows that our analytical approach toward things – even to such a highly sensitive thing as “wine” – is dominated by our “first tongue”: the tongue of language, speech, and words. This first tongue constantly rules out the analytical skills of our “second tongue,” the tongue that tastes, that explores, that keeps silent. “Sapidity slumbers beneath the narcosis of speech,” Serres writes.<sup>8</sup> This linguistic anaesthesia dispossesses people of their aesthetic sensation. In order to revitalize this aesthetic quality of things, we need our second tongue, that is: all our senses.

*Anaesthetics* is a word that should be taken seriously in the world of media studies, for at least two reasons. One, a pivotal feature of media usage is that the initial aesthetic effects wear off in the process of use up to a point where the awareness of the materiality of the medium may disappear almost fully. Two, the acquired experience of “transparency” affects media studies in profound ways,



*Fig. 1: Robert Capa with a 16mm Bell & Howell Filmo camera. The photo was made by Gerda Taro during the Spanish Civil War, May 1937.*

including the ways in which the object of study is defined. The re-sensitization of expert observers is needed to construct the epistemic object; to define what a “medium” is; and to create consensus in the field with regard to it. It has already been noted in a series of studies that the definition of “media” has become so broad that it is now in danger of losing all meaning altogether.<sup>9</sup> Providing a workable definition of its object is nevertheless crucial to any field of studies and perhaps even more so for the field of media studies as it aims at understanding cultural practices which constantly and rapidly change, and media products of which the impact tends to be ephemeral, first sensed and then forgotten, on and off, in an ongoing process of use that automatically and inevitably conceals the traces media technologies initially create in users in terms of sense responses and awareness. In fact, the study of medium-awareness cycles should help to explain why the construction of the epistemic object and an operational definition has been such a challenge to the field.

### **Re-Sensitizing the Observer**

We believe that doing historical re-enactments with old media artifacts is a heuristic approach that will offer new sensorial experiences and reflexive insights into the complex meanings and functionalities of past media technologies and practices. It aims at going beyond the “aesthetics” and “hermeneutics of astonishment” of media archaeology<sup>10</sup> by turning “observers” into “experimenters.” In creating such a space for creative exploration and tinkering with either original artifacts or replicas, the researcher will get a first-hand experience of the heuris-

tic difference between studying textual and visual representations of past media technologies and experiencing their performative qualities and limitations in real-life interaction and re-use. In engaging with the material artifacts in a laboratory environment, experimental media archaeologists actively co-construct their epistemic object.<sup>11</sup>

As we have learned from so-called “laboratory studies” in the sociology and anthropology of science, scientific “facts” or “findings” are always the specific result of a combination of concrete temporal, spatial and social factors and radically historical (that means: open to change).

The heuristic value of doing historical re-enactments lies therefore not in the (impossible) reconstruction of an “authentic” historical experience, but in creating a sensorial and intellectual experiment that will demonstrate the differences between textual, visual, and performative approaches to the past.<sup>12</sup> In other words, it is not so much the “correctness” of these re-enactments that is at stake, but their productivity; generally speaking, their usefulness in research is what really matters, as Jonathan Crary has passionately pointed out.<sup>13</sup> The hands-on approach, we believe, might help to solve the “observer’s dilemma” of classical media archaeology and hopefully create new forms of collaborations between archives, museums, media artists, and media scholars.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, it may help to close the epistemological gap in the research of media that has been left by the explanatory models assuming the transparency of media as explained above.

## De-Auratizing Artifacts

One can actually observe a kind of melancholic retrospection of our analog past. This melancholic retrospection might on the one hand be the result of a generation gap or tension between the “analog born” and “digital born.” On the other hand, it might be the product of a tension between the loss or stealthy disappearance of the material evidence of analog technologies in our daily lives and the massive resurrection of “analog-born products” in digital technologies and the Internet. While the generation gap between analog and digital is basically a demographic and therefore a temporarily delimited problem, the stealthy disappearance of material evidence of analog technologies constitutes a specific challenge for cultural heritage institutions such as museums and film and media archives.<sup>15</sup> As media scholars we should make sure that the material traces of these artifacts will not disappear from the digital radar of media scholars.<sup>16</sup> While we are enthusiastic about the possibilities of new digital research infrastructures, we are familiar with the “analog born” and historically minded enough to be aware of the danger of sacrificing the material cultural heritage of “old” media and memory technologies.

As media historians, media archaeologists, or media scholars in general we need the material traces of analog and digital memory technologies not only as

physical “witnesses” or “proof” of a period gone by, but as objects that can enlighten and educate our own analytical skills when it comes to the study of past usages of media technologies. A pure focus on “mediated memories” (or media texts) bears the danger of a reductionist perspective on media technologies, reducing the historical evidence of things to their textual tradition. Of course we are aware of the fact that the display of physical objects in a museum does not offer a “direct” or “unmediated” access to things. The objects in museums are staged artifacts. The visual gaze offered to a visitor of a museum is often that of a highly aestheticized view, and “things” or “objects” are staged as “master pieces” – even in museums of science and technology.<sup>17</sup> Yet the “aura of the original,” which museums and archives try to stage, is of course a faked one.<sup>18</sup> The “aura” – at least in the sense of Walter Benjamin – is destroyed from the very moment an object is detached from its original environment. And it is exactly because of this inevitable “loss” of aura that museums try to create a new narrative framework, aimed at staging a mediated experience of the “aura.” This re-auratization of objects in (white cube) museums is in fact a process of black-boxing, turning things into “objects of desire.”<sup>19</sup>

Experimental media archaeology aims at opening the black boxes and turning museums and archives into laboratories for experimental research. In order to do so, the apparatuses (“artifacts”)<sup>20</sup> have to be taken out of the aestheticized and glass-cased exhibition environments of museums and archives and transferred into the exploratory space of a media-archaeology laboratory. Such a lab creates a research environment needed to substantiate the claims of media studies regarding the impact of media technologies on audiences empirically and experimentally. It helps to close the gap between media research in the humanities and the sciences.

## A New Research Agenda

This plea for an experimental approach to media archaeology aims at offering new perspectives to a better historical understanding of past media practices by pleading for “re-enactment” as a new methodological approach in media research. Doing re-enactments with old media technologies in an experimental media-archaeology lab will produce new historical, ethnographic, and empirical knowledge about past user practices and media experiences. It will advance our classical repertoire of sources generally used to study past user generations by the co-production of experimental data and ethnographic observations. Experimental media archaeology goes beyond:

- The discursive re-construction of the “configured user” (as staged in advertisements)

- The literary study of the “expert users” (as found in technical and consumer association journals and professional publications)
- The analysis of “amateur users” (as staged in “how to” manuals, popular journals, amateur club publications)
- The co-construction of “remembered usages” (as in oral history sources or performed in ego-documents)

Historical re-enactment (experimenting with old media technologies)<sup>21</sup> will:

- Provide new insights in the sense of time and temporality inscribed in the materiality of media technologies (e.g., the limited amount of recording time in home movie technology or the extensive exposure time of early photography)
- Enhance awareness of the spatial and topographical information inscribed in media practices (both of production and consumption)
- Enable a better understanding of the “constructivist nature” of media technology products (photographs, films, audio recordings, etc.) as historical sources (e.g., handling them as “staged performances” rather than “snapshot versions of life,” that is, questioning the “visual” or “sonic” evidence of audiovisual sources)
- Make scholars of past media technologies “experience” rather than intellectually appropriate the acts of making and screening film as social and cultural practices

In offering these new insights and experiences, experimental media archaeology will inform us about the “tacit knowledge” involved in the use of media technologies and will thereby sensitize us to the role of our senses and our body in the human/machine interaction. This sensorial awareness will re-sensitize the media scholar to the social and cultural inscriptions in the materiality of media technologies beyond the discursive level.<sup>22</sup> Playing and tinkering with the material objects in a research lab will de-auratize the artifacts and help to decode the critical role of design as “mediating interface” between technology and the users.<sup>23</sup> In reconstructing and re-enacting idealized “how to” user scenarios, the experimental media archaeologists will be able to analyze and experience the differences between the social dynamics of media usages (“ensemble play”), and performing practices (“collective viewing”/“hearing”/“commentating”) and their idealized discursive narratives and commercial staging. In promoting a hands-on philosophy concerning the collections of film and media archives and museums, experimental media archaeology aims at turning artifacts into research objects and to re-establish the experimental tradition of museums. In short, it aims at turning archives and museums into research laboratories rather than mausoleums of past masterpieces.<sup>24</sup>

In doing so, we would like to initiate a dialogue between the academic community of film and media scholars with engineers, curators, archivists, and the millions of media amateurs, collectors, and other technical experts who – in a steady growing number – wish to share their expertise and knowledge in online platforms and home pages. While this incredible source of information is rarely used and even less appreciated by professional scholars, we envision an interactive and participatory online database which gathers all kind of “information” regarding the development, use, invention, imagination, design, rejection, intellectual appropriation, and resistance of media devices of all times and places.

Media Scholars and Amateurs of All Countries and Disciplines, Hands-on!



## Experimental Media Archaeology: A Plea for New Directions

1. For a reflection on the work of Friedrich Kittler and his impact on the humanities, see the dialogue with Geoffrey Winthrop-Young in this book.
2. As to the field of film studies, these are some recent signs that a shift may take place in the direction of having more attention for the materiality of the medium; see Jane Gaines, "What Happened to the Philosophy of Film History?" *Film History* 25, no. 1-2 (2013): 70-80. Outside media archaeology, the digitization of film triggered a great many reflections regarding the past and future of the cinema and film archives too, though "very few of those publications have shed light on the consequences of this media transition on our perception of the filmic past," as Barbara Flueckiger argues in "Material Properties of Historical Film in the Digital Age," published in *Necus European Journal of Media Studies* 2 (Fall 2012). Flueckiger refers to *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*, in which Giovanna Fossati "identifies a lack of exchange between archives and academic institutions." Fossati, she indicates, "establishes some very useful frameworks to investigate the topic by combining archival practices with a film studies perspective"; see <http://www.necus-ejms.org/material-properties-of-historical-film-in-the-digital-age/>.
3. For a reflection on the terms *l'appareil de base* and *dispositif*, referring to the technological devices of film production and projection and the viewing situation respectively, see the chapter on Christian Metz and the apparatus theory in this book.
4. Jeffrey Ferguson, ed., *Designing Research in Archaeology: Examining Technology through Production and Use* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2010).
5. Olaf Breidbach, Peter Heering, Matthias Müller, and Heiko Weber, eds., *Experimentelle Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (München: Fink Verlag, 2010).
6. R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 218.
7. Ulrich Kühne, *Die Methode des Gedankenexperiments* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2005).
8. Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (London: Continuum, 2008), 153.
9. For an overview, see "What Are Media?" by Lambert Wiesing in this book.
10. See Thomas Elsaesser, "The New Film History as Media Archaeology," *Cinémas: Revue d'Études Cinématographiques* 14, no. 2-3 (2004): 75-117.
11. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *Historische Epistemologie zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius-Verlag, 2007).
12. Otto Sibum, "Experimentelle Wissenschaftsgeschichte," in *Instrument – Experiment. Historische Studien*, ed. Christoph Meinel (Berlin: GNT-Verlag, 2000), 61-73. See also Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe, "The Migration of the Aura or How to Explore the Original through Its Facsimiles," in *Switching Codes: Thinking through Digital Technology in the Humanities and the Arts*, ed. Thomas Bartscherer and Roderick Coover (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), available at <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/108-ADAM-FACSIMILES-GB.pdf>.
13. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 7.
14. Wanda Strauven, "The Observer's Dilemma: To Touch or Not to Touch," in *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, ed. Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 148-163.

15. See notes on Film as UNESCO World Heritage: <http://www.imago.org/index.php?new=604>. See also the highly interesting reflections by filmmaker Tacita Dean in "Film," *FIAF Journal* 86 (April 2012): 11-21, available at <http://www.fiafnet.org/pdf/JFP/86.pdf>.
16. Google being the most powerful of these radars nowadays; see Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble* (London: Viking Press, 2001).
17. Tony Bennett, "Speaking to the Eyes: Museums, Legibility and the Social Order," in *Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (London: Routledge, 1998), 29.
18. Sharon Macdonald, "Exhibitions of Power and Power of Exhibition," in *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (London: Routledge, 1998), 2.
19. On the loss of aura, see: Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility: Third Version," in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 251-283. On the different "dispositifs" created by (classical) cinemas and museums, see Raymond Bellour, *La Querelle des dispositifs. Cinéma – installations, expositions* (Paris: P.O.L. [Collection traffic], 2012). For a reflection on the media experience as an art experience, see Annie van den Oever, "The Medium-Sensitive Experience and the Paradigmatic Experience of the Grotesque, 'Unnatural' or 'Monstrous,'" in *Leonardo* 46, no. 1 (February 2013): 88-89.
20. We fully acknowledge the distinction between the film artifact (as a conceptual rather than material thing) and the apparatus artifact (as a material rather than a conceptual thing) as discussed by Fossati in *From Grain to Pixel*, pointing out that the tension between material and conceptual artifact is typical of film; see first and last chapters of her book. Note that we suggest that the apparatus in a strictly material sense, as *appareil de base*, is used for re-enactment, e.g., to tease out its performative qualities, inviting research on the artifact as a conceptual thing.
21. Some interesting notes on re-newing the experience of old media technologies are provided by Tom Gunning, "Re-Newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of -the-Century," in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*, ed. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2003), 39-59.
22. See the work of Madeleine Akrich and Bruno Latour on descriptions and inscriptions in *Shaping Technology, Building Society*, ed. W. Bijker and J. Law (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).
23. See Andreas Fickers, "Design als 'mediating interface.' Zur Zeugen- und Zeichenhaftigkeit des Radioapparats," *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 30, no. 3 (2007): 199-213.
24. The shift from archive to research laboratory was discussed in the one-day symposium "The Film Archive as a Research Laboratory," organized by the University of Groningen in close collaboration with EYE Film Institute The Netherlands, with Ian Christie, Eef Masson, Sabine Lenk, Frank Kessler, Roger Odin, Susan Aasman, Andreas Fickers, Heide Schlüpmann and Jan Holmberg; the symposium was hosted by Giovanna Fossati and Annie van den Oever, who will present the results of the

discussion in an anthology to be published in the *Framing Film Series* in 2014. See <http://homemoviesproject.wordpress.com/events/symposium-the-film-archive-as-a-research-laboratory/>.