Talk

WHAT IS MEDIA ARCHAEOLOGY, 10 YEARS LATER

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Editor's Note: In the context of the Jussi Parikka Permanent Seminar of the Doctorate in Communication at the Universidad de la Frontera and the Universidad Austral de Chile, Jussi Parikka delivered the following conference in English. The journal Perspectivas de la Comunicación *publishes in this issue both the original version and a Spanish translation, with the aim of bringing Parikka's thought on media closer to the Ibero-American audience.*

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You can learn more about Dr. Parikka on his website at http://jussiparikka.net.

Around 2012, one part of my research into media archaeology came to a temporary conclusion – the book *What is Media Archaeology?* represented one summary of what I saw as the key parameters of this broad field. Yet, I was constantly emphasizing that this was only a temporary summary: there would be a multitude of other stories, histories, or theoretical emphasis that could be written and told. In 2011 we had already published our joint edited book with Erkki Huhtamo – *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications,* and Implications that gathered a range of key writers across different fields: from film studies to new media studies, artists and scholars, it provided an early take on the range of approaches and themes indeed that populated the field in the early 2000s. That, too, was only a temporary archaeology of media archaeology – itself a fragment ---- but not fragment as self-imposed limitation or romanticisation but a reflection of the way historical knowledge and knowledge formations had been thought at least since new historicism (a key influence to some parts of media archaeology) as well as the sort of "reading through fragments" of the likes of Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault. "Total systems of knowledge" seemed impossible, and undesirable.

Before our work, many others had appeared and many had defined and articulated media archaeology again in a range of fields – some more clearly, some less so preferring to "do" media archaeology, not define it. That was also fine – after all, the field and its methods were at least partly invented by artists who through installations, sound and audiovisual works, as well as process-based methods had investigated what it meant to turn to seemingly obsolete media in the midst of burgeoning "newness" of internet and digital culture. The likes of Paul Demarinis and Zoe Beloff fit into this mix, as do later artists and designers like my collaborator Garnet Hertz or for example Aura Satz, working with media archaeologies of sound as well often with topics related to gender. Similarly, Anne Friedberg, Mary Ann Doane, Jonathan Crary, Friedrich Kittler, even Paul Virilio seemed media and humanities scholars "doing" this thing without the term "archaeology" in the mix.

While I want to talk of "10 years after", we could ask the question in two directions: what was 10 years before? 20 years before, 30, or even 100 years before in a longer term historical commitment so familiar to media archaeology – to write an intellectual history of this particular field that we know, is in many ways in the same spirit as Benjamin's ruins and fragments but this is not necessarily also anymore the main reference point considering the range of other tasks we have at hand. What's more, we have already some excellent and

detailed works we can turn to: I can warmly recommend Knut Ebeling's own wild take on the matters – Wild Archaeologies, a massive two-volume book on the wandering notion of archaeology beyond archaeology; as it ranges from philosophy of Immanuel Kant to Freud to Foucault to Friedrich Kittler. Similarly Thomas Elsaesser's wonderful self-reflections and summaries – and critical points – in his take on media archaeology, including in a 2016 article on media archaeology as a symptom, not as the solution. Elsaesser argues that media archaeology flourished as a function of the discourses of digital media, with two points especially intriguing: that media archaeology also continued what in Elsaesser's words was "our culture's most prominent pathology" – "*the need to preserve the past, to fetishize 'memory' and 'materiality' in the form of trauma and loss, even as we lose faith in history and make our lives evermore dependent on the 'virtual'." (Elsaesser 2016)*. And secondly, that in cherishing every possible earlier forgotten trait, theme, and technology, it might be easily adapted by the industry of nostalgia – whether that of the contemporary art or some other – that happily lifts the value of any quirky invention as vintage and retro.

With this in mind, I also want to emphasize a couple of things and themes – ones that help to situate some of the contexts of media archaeology or to insist that there is also a more specified task that must resist such nostalgisation and focus on some other aspects of knowledge production through the minority position.

So in this talk I want to do a couple of things. Firstly, to follow up on a couple of points from the summary of What is Media Archaeology? – namely the three coordinates that are in the conclusions of the book, defining it through a particular methodology, attitude, epistemic atmosphere and activity:

On doing - on practice of media archaeology
On temporality – on the multiplicity of temporalities, in ways that also can work to move to "other times" that might resonate with decolonial agendas
On matter – a question of materiality so often discussed in media theory, "materialist media theory" which still haunts as as object collections, as practices with software and signal-processing, and other technical and non-technical realities of media.

While most of my work since this book has *not* touched on media archaeology as such – even my book Geology of Media that was translated into Spanish by Caja Negra publisher the other year is not really a media archaeology book but more about environmental media and

humanities – I still want to reflect on some themes that I find interesting in recent research as well as emphasize some strands that I now see even more clearly as important than earlier. (And anyone who has seen the book that Mimesis publisher here in Chile put together, sees that of course some of my work for example on "remains" has continued some of the media archaeological questions about memory, time, and so forth).

Now, occasionally I have been accused of not giving a simple definition of media archaeology- but would this be possible in the first place? There is no one media archaeology and would it not miss the point about multiple beginnings and multiplicity of the field to insist on one?

Although, I have actually attempted to write one that would try to mediate between the different bodies of theory and media that constitute its core parts – and the sort of methodological atmosphere of media archaeology. Be warned, it is long and cumbersome.

https://jussiparikka.net/2012/12/16/what-is-media-archaeology-beta-definition-ver-0-9/

"Media archaeology can be understood as a **heterogeneous set of theories and methods** that investigate media history through its alternative roots, forgotten paths, neglected ideas and machines. It explicitly challenges the supposed newness of digital culture. Media archaeology gives new ideas to understand media cultural temporality. The definitions have ranged from emphasizing the recurring nature of media cultural discourses (Huhtamo) to media archaeology as an-archaeology, or variantology (Zielinski) which in its excavation of the deep time layers of our means of seeing and hearing tries to find an alternative route to dismantle the fallacy of linear development.

Furthermore, I see media archaeology as a joint history & theory venture in which temporal excavation of media functions as a **theoretical force** as well; it can be characterized as a reading of old **media and new media in parallel lines**. Media archaeology is decisively non-linear, and rigorously theoretical in its media historical interest of knowledge. In a Benjaminian vein, it abandons historicism when by it is meant the idea that the past is given and out there waiting for us to find it; instead, it believes in the radical assembling of history, and histories in the plural, but so that it is not only a subset of cultural historical writing. Instead, media archaeology needs to insist both on the material nature of its enterprise – that media are always articulated in material, also in non-narrative frameworks whether technical media such as photography, or algorithmic media features such as databases and software networks – and that the work of assembling temporal mediations takes place in an increasingly varied and distributed network of institutions, practices and technological platforms.

> Indeed, what media archaeology investigates are also the practical rewirings of time, as is done in media artistic and creative practice work, through archives digital and traditional, as well as DIY and circuit bending which recycle, and remix obsolete technology as much as they investigate aesthetic and political economic conditions of technical media.
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> Media archaeology takes place in artistic labs, laboratories where hardware and software are hacked and opened, but also in in conceptual labs for experimenting with concepts and ideas."

The definition is lengthy and I won't discuss it in detail, let alone read all of it. (note, the above is not read in entirety, just on screen).

Let me just pick a couple of phrases:
First, it is heterogeneous, which reflects a lot about the sort of key humanities theories born in the 1970s and 1980s that moved across disciplines: media studies, gender and queer studies, post-colonial and then decolonial studies, etc. are not defined only in simple terms of a discipline but in how they reformulate disciplines and their methods, and build new objects of knowledge. Media archaeology works in similar ways, with similar spirit of traveling concepts.

It is about time – much of the work is methodologically about history and archival work – to look for alternatives paths and ignored trajectories – but this work is done with an explicit or implicit theory of time that is alternative to history (as linear written story): deep time, recursive time, microtemporality are some of the terms that feature in those methods. As per many of the theoretical critics, such as Kittler, the technical basis of recording of time had moved on from the mode of human writing human history to something else, a point continued e.g. by Wolfgang Ernst. This is also where the point from Knut Ebeling makes sense: "In archaeology one does not count from the beginning to the end; one calculates back from the end, which is the present."[1]

Then, speaking of counting and calculating – there are materialities that are not necessarily automatically open to the human interpretative narrative format: one reads technical media

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1 Knut Ebeling, "The Art of Searching. On 'Wild Archaeologies' from Kant to Kittler." The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics No. 51 (2016), 10.

in a different way than one reads a book, to state it simply. This, then, is also central to many other fields that emerged in the past decades: software studies, etc. are keen to find specific methods that do not just import earlier assumptions about "cultural texts" to their work but have to think how to develop methods from the material itself.

Finally, about place and space, as context of "doing" or "practice/praxis" – this was a hint of something that came back as a central part of a collaborative work that was released just last year: our Lab Book continued this thread about spaces of media archaeology but also media theory, studies and other humanities practices by asking the question about labs: why are there so many labs in the past years, not all in any way part of the legacy of the corporate MIT Media Lab but represent all sorts of scales of practice including indeed the centrality of media archaeology labs such as my colleague Lori Emerson's work at Boulder, Colorado or Darren Wershler's Residual Media Depot that carries at least in spirit the emphasis on media archaeological practices of residuals but also for example circuit bending as some of his activities with games and consoles represents.

As for tropes of movement and themes that I want to continue as part of my reflection, I am indebted to the notion of "traveling" with a hat tip to Mieke Bal (she speaks of traveling concepts that glue different disciplines together – so much that we don't even notice their powers; take for example classic notions such as "author" or indeed, such terms as "decolonial" that carry with them both historical, conceptual, and affective forces). And a hat tip to Edward Said for traveling theory.

In a short reflection of traveling, let me start with a simple point that itself links with the question of situation as a vector, not a point – to the primacy of movement and how is rolled out both as disciplinary formation, change in the impact and meaning of theoretical concepts, as well as in what a political context of use of "traveling" might contain.

Media archaeology like other disciplines, theories, concepts, travels. That is one of the guiding ideas of the book What is Media Archaeology? and it is articulated as part of the transformation of concepts, fields, even sometimes disciplines. Ideas take place in institutional contexts, in exchanges, in discourses and in suitcases that carry notes, books, random pieces of paper and other media of thinking. Ideas and concepts take flight as emails and packages of books sent across borders, and in reading groups that open up, resituate,

debate and critique concepts.[2] Borders are sometimes not easy to cross and the centrality of migration, movement, and free borders should not be taken lightly or metaphorically.

How to negotiate the two? How to account for mobility and movement of concepts and people?

Theoretically, it is perhaps easier. I explain in the introduction to the book that the idea of media archaeology as a traveling set of concepts and methods refers to how it was never placed in just one discipline but travels between media and cinema studies, art history and art practices, history of technology and sciences; however translations demonstrate it travels also across languages. This is important for various reasons. The obvious one is that new concepts might introduce new sorts of discussions and become useful in transforming fields in different academic languages. But another is that they also trigger already bubbling under forms of research and give name to practices that are practiced in other contexts of art and research. We often do things we don't have a name for, and this applies also to academic work. Something like media history, but not quite. Something that is part of media theory, but not only. Something that speaks about cultural history of science and technology but is practiced by artists as well. And then, of course the realization that: media archaeology is at times closer to histories of art and technology than traditional communication studies. Sometimes it exercises philosophical arguments about the nature of time and temporality; some ideas resonate with work in gender studies: I am here thinking for example Giuliana Bruno's *Atlas of Emotion* as one example of gender studies, art history and cinema studies sharing a common ground.[3] Media archaeology, then, is also a catalyser and a conduit for interdisciplinary investigations into the worlds of technology but also in ways that provide alternative methodologies to those of mass media or communication studies. Indeed, to riff with Edward Said in his take on "traveling theory", in the final words of that article: "And what is critical consciousness at bottom if not an unstoppable predilection for alternatives?"

But now, I want to ask, what sort of alternatives we are after? Even this predilection is loaded with histories of those traveling theories and concepts and their own political geohistory –

2 See also Mieke Bal, Traveling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.
3 Giuliana Bruno, Atlas of Emotion. London: Verso, 2002/2018.

that they come from places and travel to places, that theories are vectors, not points and as such, also are meant to mobilize things at the sites of arrival. To take into account Elsaesser's warning that *romanticization of any alternative whatsoever is not an option*, we might as well investigate some of the terms employed.

At the back of the point about immigration, what else would also come to mind is to think of the travels of theory in relation to questions of placement and deplacement, fragility and enforced migration, as well as hostility that we witness across the world at the back of attacks against critical race theory (such as in the US but also in many other places) and other critical theories, as well as re-emergence of far right forces that want to set up even stronger borders. This broader mess continues the earlier years of theory or method wars, but also involves the multiscalar forces of ultra-conservatives with neo-fascists and many transnational links too.

Connotations of traveling are not necessarily cozy conference visits but stressful encounters with border regimes and policing – whether theoretical or actual. Hence, the past years of resurfaced discussion about decoloniality must also be one part of this broader reflection on such seemingly apolitical discourses as media archaeology, as far as it has to think through what this traveling might mean as a way to carve out local contexts where concepts start to build their own archives and meaningful connotations.

A couple of things might happen: firstly, our notion of media might change, from the body of "naturalized" reference points across standard histories of modernity and media. What sort of an alternative framework emerges when processes of urbanization and mediation are not the same, nor are the sort of frameworks for emergence for "newness" when we do not even agree on one timeline of what is new and old (same indeed goes for what is obsolete, in which terms, and what goes even in the more loaded category of waste, as in electronic and other media waste). Hence, I want to ask what comes out from such starting points as integral waste – Sean Cubitt's term – that rearranges use and misuse , labor and exploitation in ways that by necessity asks for a different story, a different starting point which reads exploitation of human energy as parallel to the sort of externationalion of ills of energy production that is taking place as pollution of lands (and often, indigenous lands).

This broader task of understanding colonial contexts together with decolonial futures is then not just an expansion of topics, but also to further radically look at what are the meaningful

starting points for materiality – one that can include also materiality of labor, gendered labor, racialized labor and capitalism as it enters to something that escapes any pre-given template. Indeed, the sort of reference to another modernity, or alter-modernities, is already a field much more advanced in these terms – of several decades indeed. So to follow Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea, the provincialization of Europe needs to be central to much of where media archaeology is going – and I would add, a provincialization of the Anglo-North-American link, while recognizing the plurality of Europe, including its own colonial mechanisms (such as in relation to Russian imperialism and colonialism) including racialization of different aspects of so-called whiteness too.

(Let it be said though that I have huge respect for the sort of "Variantology" that Zielinski did in collaboration with scholars from China to Middle-East and to Latin America in search of primacy of variation for a media archaeological corpus.)

Now, if traveling thus becomes part of a political history of trajectories, our task becomes more interesting than just a cozy "interdisciplinarity". Indeed, what is media archaeology when faced with the intensification of technologies of automation – such as different AI platforms for text and image – as they are rewired to the early 20th century experimental modes of expression including automatic writing, statistical experiments with language, and other forms of decentering the subject? Or what is media archaeology when faced with a radically different scale of mediation that takes place as cloud infrastructures, big data, and the link between measurement-data and power? Some of this work is already done and under way, not least in reading histories of data through the massive apparatuses of colonialism in those terms, as well as histories of logistics as such; what might next be on the agenda though is to ask at what scale media archaeology can remain effective – at what scale does it relate to the planetary transformation under way of which questions of remote sensing and data infrastructures are one emblem? Part of this would have to refocus surely on the history of mathematics such as probability calculus at least since the 17th century, and statistical methods and techniques at least since the 19th century, and other similar modes of mediation by way of numbers, counting, and algebra at the back of these devices of re-scaling, and data storage that happens by way of notation systems and their capacity to deal with abstractions.

Furthermore, as for my pet topic, how about the environment – as in the massive scale climate transformation and its relation to questions of mediation, knowledge, and other

topics that are also not removed from media studies even if media archaeology has had often little to say about those. Although, we have great examples of what environmental media archaeology could be: Nadia Bozak on the fossil fuel basis of early film, returning the question of light to this political ecology too; questions of temperature and mediation as for example Nicole Starosielski has been actively pursuing in her hot and cold media -research, media archaeologies of planetary materiality down to their earthly core, not least such cases as are central to Chile and the surrounding regions relating to mining, now more focused on the conditions of green transition but as significantly involving many layers of what Maritn Arboledo has coined the planetary mine. The same could be applied to energy – a topic that is much better so far covered by colleagues in histories of science, and related cultural histories (and the broader field of energy humanities), and then many other examples of intersection of weather, mediation and data (such as scientic and operational maps like for weather), and their respective infrastructures of communication; my interest is related in this area, as I need to write something next on *media art histories of environmental data*, in other words, such models of sensing and storage of data that come to be discussed by way of artistic and design methods.

So if media archaeology was born – and perhaps not even resolved – crisis of temporality, representation, and some other as Thomas Elsaesser has so elegantly shown, I wonder what crisis other than the climate is the one now as an essential condition for our work?

Here, to emphasize, media archaeology not pitched as some sort of solution – there are other directions that are more geared toward this topic. And yet, it is an inescapable horizon for also humanities knowledge and the methods and practices we use in our work. It can amount to both an investigation of how the nexus of colonialism/modernity that, as Walter Mignolo and others remind, functions at the back of modern forms of knowledge and power is linked to the trio of colonialism/modernity/climate crisis. This trio, then, is also about questions of materiality (environmental weight but also epistemic processes of knowledge that media is central to – a point that I make in my concept of "medianatures), on temporality (deep times but not the ones that are echoed in the problematic "long termism" of some of current think tanks and transhumanists), and on doing – as in, what sort of practices and spaces function as infrastructure of the humanities, including of media archaeology.

Thank you.