Uselessness in Reserve?

An exploration of the laugh track, "media" and *the frivolous*

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Abstract

Uselessness in Reserve? An exploration of the laugh track, "media" and *the frivolous*

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Within contemporary media studies the notion *uselessness* is either under-examined or given short-play as representing quantifiable loss. Registered as material waste or as mechanical deficiency measured by what is useful that which is *useless* gets categorically parsed and dismissed as an irrelevant by-product of a medium's operations. However, by definition, *uselessness* resists being instrumentalized and assigned a knowable role. Furthermore, as the thesis argues, when considered materially, what is deemed useless to the optimal workings of a technological medium, whether wanted or not, surreptitiously impacts the reserve of procedures that delimit the workings of a media formation. Though the notion *uselessness,* as informed by Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of Etienne Bonnot de Condillac's account of *the frivolous/uselessness*, is paradoxical in kind and indeterminate in effect, the thesis proposes that *uselessness* is far more integral to media formations than contemporary discourse permit. Accordingly, media theorists need to foster other approaches that allow engaging such an aporia.

For directly exploring *uselessness* in media, the laugh track holds promise as an instance in which a media formation makes useless its production. However, to examine the laugh track by how it may be illogically constituted – as opposed to conventional examinations of how the laugh track functions or serves broader interests – requires deployment of certain expansive methods and discursive tools. Accordingly, Siegfried Zielinski's media *an*archaeology permits

exploring the laugh track as its own paradoxical system. His approach helps to investigate the operational attributes that re-codify the laugh track's material registry as a redundant system of archivation, a uselessness in reserve.

Ultimately, Zielinski's anarchic approach permits drawing radical implications beyond technological and communicative-governed formulations of media. The laugh track may be explored much like how Giorgio Agamben speculates about *the gesture*. For Agamben the gesture may be experienced as a "pure means" or an activity liberated from content and purpose dictated by apophantic principles. Accordingly, independently of means/end instrumentalist thinking the laugh track may be encountered by how it, integral to its mediatic operations, paradoxically maintains its productivity through a gesture – of never-ending archival actions – that renders its product useless.

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Fig. 11. Charley Douglass' tapes and notebook for Laff Box screen-capture, PBS' "Antiques Roadshow" website video, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/season/15/san-diego-ca/appraisals/1953-charlie-douglass-laff-box--201001A13/ (accessed April 8, 2016).

Preface

The main idea for *Uselessness in Reserve?* is to further the often incidental discussion within contemporary analyses of media that entertains impotence, un-programmability, unproductiveness, in short, *uselessness.* On the face of things, this would appear to be a discussion that issues a challenge to the use-oriented biases of current programs of analyses and that assumes a binary opposition. Perhaps then, a challenge is afoot. However, though *uselessness* is readily cast as obvious counterpart to a category of *the useful*, my interest is to attempt to suspend this binary formulation. Rather, I wish to give play to the possibility that *uselessness* is, and most uselessly so, integral to what takes form as what gets assumed as being of use.[1] Mindful to avoid committing the sin of contradiction by making *use* of the *useless*, my exploration is thus guided by the questions: *Is*, and *how* might, a discourse on *uselessness* be possible?

To grapple with how uselessness may be in play within an experience of contemporary media, I focus my exploration around the paradoxical character of the laugh track as a system of production. Instead of simply treating it as a function within a specific cultural production (i.e., TV sitcom), I consider it as techno-archival media formation. The laugh track is organized by its own principle of disposability for systematically rendering it as a productive dud. Productive of a laugh for sure, but always a process pre-mediated within an un-registerable laughing that, as I will attempt to explore, defies being purposive.

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[1] In a sense, it is arguable that *uselessness* is unquantifiable, however it is never really reducible to its unquantifiability – as that would render it of characterizable use (perhaps poetically). Further, though an etymological query may be useless for the following enterprise I note the Greek word for "useless" is *anofelís*. Curious factoid: in 1818 *anofelís* became the name of the genus of mosquito that transmits malaria.

For probing into the laugh track as its own discrete media formation I gain much traction from methods and insights of media archaeologists Wolfgang Ernst and Siegfried Zielinski. Though media archaeology is seemingly a readymade fit for this media specific exploration, we are, in turn by such methodology, prompted to reflect on our access and approach to its archival peculiarity. Thus, my analytic, though centred on the elusive and perhaps fruitless proposition of accounting for *uselessness*, also entails a confrontation with presuppositions at core to the discursive practice of media archaeology.

General Ideas for the Project

"*Uselessness in Reserve?* An exploration of the Laugh Track, "Media" and *The Frivolous"* involves thinking through the relation between a discourse on media and "the frivolous." The relation is explored through the concrete manifestation of the modern technological radio and television broadcast practice of producing and archiving laughter. My dissertation plans aside, what literature there is on the laugh track assumes it to be a media formation with a particular constitution as device/function for broader social or cultural interest and as mechanism that conveys something that either conceals an anxiety or some kind of production-related inadequacy. Accordingly, we really only have an intellectual reserve of how theories of media and of sound theory purposefully constitute our experience of the laugh track.

By itself, the patented "Laff Box," a beacon of invention in the history of the modern laugh track, appears to stand as a source of intrigue. Its inventor Charley Douglass, much like an over-bearing archivist, went to extraordinary lengths to conceal both the re-generative workings of his machine and the visceral contents of its production. Sure the Laff Box represents a fascinating period of inventiveness in laugh track lore but its treatment also serves to *tip us off* to a more technical and media specific insight. That being, at the very instance of generating a

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simulation of an idealized audience response the Laff Box is also a compiling of recorded and re-recorded or encoded and re-encoded, effectively *always already*, remediated data that constitutes a particular system of archivation. Needless to say, again in keeping with a general survey of the literature, no laugh track theorist has followed up on such a tip. Forget for the moment my thinking that the laugh track is a paradoxical medium, not much is actually written on the laugh track as a materio-mechanical formation. Thus, another approach is required to re-position the discussion of canned laughter from being predominantly analyzed as TV sitcom-action related phenomena to being an archive-authorized electronic artefact.

Alternatively, to doing cultural history, I pursue the laugh track somewhat informed by a media archaeological approach.[2] Media archaeology rejects the cultural and classical historian's linear or category delineating strategies that would ultimately reduce the laugh track to being a tool within a broader scheme of production. Generally speaking, media archaeology gets us to engage the de-narrativization inherent in the dispersed and dispersive nature of any database's structure. Accordingly, media archaeologists like Wolfgang Ernst prompt discourse focused on a medium's own generative capacity.[3] Along these lines, to some extent at least, I examine the laugh track. I attempt to explore the laugh track as a *self*-regulating medium with its own historically distinct formation of archival procedures.

However, simply changing approaches does not necessarily mean that my exploration is then free and clear from the implications of theorizing that imparts a purpose to media formations. A mere shift to media archaeology does not make my exploration of a particular media formation immune to the designs of a use/useless metric. Before any approach it would

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[2] See Wolfgang Ernst's "Media Archaeography: Method and Machine versus History and Narrative of Media," Media Archaeology:Approaches, Applications, and Implications. Erkki Huhtamo, Jussi Parikka eds. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011, pp. 239–255.
[3] Ibid.

appear there presides a formidable theoretical system that restricts engaging the laugh track as that which is understandable in terms of a condition of technology and as having a purpose to communicate. Generally speaking, this means that media of whatever form is governed by a program of instrumentalization – of what is useful, purposeful and achieves results. Effectively, apart from a particular interest in the constitution of the laugh track I have a more general interest, a provocation. I look to challenge how media, media formations should be engaged, my main concern being that goal-oriented analysis prevents us from experiencing media formations in other ways. Instead, I ask of discourses on media: what about that which is partitioned off, overlooked, disregarded, in fact, at times, openly dismissed as without purpose, as pointless, as frivolous? Further, what role, if indeed we may call it a role, does *the frivolous*, a rather indeterminate and seemingly un-categorizable notion, have in the making and structuring of any form of discourse? Specifically applied to my dissertation *Uselessness in Reserve?* I take up thinking through the very functions of questioning and thinking by which, in the constructing of a discourse on media, we somehow come to dismiss, displace and discard from our supposed communicative acts that which is considered frivolous, useless or inconsequential to our analysis.

Towards these ends Jacques Derrida, through his deconstructive reading of the 18th century empirical linguist Etienne Bonnot de Condillac's perplexing account of the useless, provides some direction.[4] Derrida traces the useless or *the frivolous,* as Condillac refers to the useless, to being a self-contradicting but necessary function of any signifier within Condillac's linguistic system. Derrida exposes, *the frivolous* is somehow, in its uselessness, integral to the sign. Though of no use to the sign, *the frivolous,* which by Condillac's definition is absolutely

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[4] See Jacques Derrida's *The Archeology of the Frivolous: Reading Condillac.* John P. Leavey Jr., trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1980, orig.1973.

useless, *is* a part of the sign, it is structurally purposeful (admittedly indeterminately and contradictorily). It is in this sense that I explore the constitution of the laugh track system of production. In Part Three I state: "the laugh track as archival formation is constituted as a conundrum. Laughter is made purposeful by making useless its being purposeful. To simulate the immediacy of laughter, through the very referencing mechanisms for archiving it, the laugh track makes an artefact of laughter. Which means: to be presented as laughter, laughter must then already be exhausted and spent. Within the system of the laugh track's functioning laughter is thereby already put in reserve. Parallel to Condillac's contradictory account of *the sign*, within the laugh track system, laughter is instrumentalized as useless. Here, laughter, in being a tool, *is* what I take to be paradoxical. It is uselessness in reserve. More to the point, it is a uselessness of a potential use. Its repeated functioning must always be *de*funct to be spent again."

Though Derrida's deconstruction of Condillac's account of the sign provides some traction for thinking through the particular contradictory nature of the frivolous or uselessness of a media formation, with respect to gaining distance from a program of instrumentality that pre-authorizes our understanding of media I actually gain much more from the anarchistic promptings of both contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben and media anarchaeologist Siegfried Zielinski. In short, Agamben's notion of the gesture[5] diverges from the instrumentalist, propositional and oppositional framing by which we may declare something as knowable. Rather, a gesture, as thought by Agamben, represents an alternative mode of engagement to the orthodoxy for positing a means/end structure. It is this means to end thinking that supports an instrumentalist characterization of and engagement with media and technology, and in particular,

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[5] See Giorgio Agamben's "Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*," "Notes on Politics," in *Means Without Ends*: *Notes on Politics*. Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo   Binetti, trans. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

the laugh track. So, in following Agamben, not only do we gain insight into the mechanism contributing to our remaining blind to how the laugh track is constituted as well as blithely reinforcing a way of examining the media object we also come to engage how a media formation may not be examinable. And this is exactly where Zielinski comes into play.[6] Extending Michel Foucault's thinking on the archive in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Zielinski unfetters media from known, knowable, in short determining conditions. Zielinski circumvents the archive and puts into question the material gathering point of *the technological* authorized to determine media as mediative. Effectively, Zielinski strips the archive of its presumed authority. He attempts to explore media formations as unbounded by epistemic parameters. In effect, the past of media formations may be irretrievable, if retrievable at all, by one system of registration. Applying Zielinski's insight we may thus approach the laugh track as an archival formation that, even within its very quantification processes, is also *other* than instrumental. That is, as a media formation the laugh track may be explored in ways that defy purposiveness and use/useless metrics that circumscribe discourses on media.

Analyzing Function

     Although Agamben and Zielinski provide the general philosophical questions for engaging the laugh track in ways that challenge an instrumental bias, I still had to contend with the laugh track media formation as having an assumed status, role, specifically being referred to as "a function" within a system of communication. So in order to explore how the laugh track as its own media formation might be constituted I grappled with the significance of the term

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[6] See Siegfried Zielinski's *Deep Time of the Media: toward an archaeology of hearing and seeing by Technical Means.* Gloria Custance, trans. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006.

"function" that rather tacitly designates the category for determining what a media formation is and does. To be clear, this critical engagement with function in no way dissolves or even dispenses with function. In fact, although "uselessness" may be my main interest, in certain respects my entire project is under the spell and authority of function. Actually, as things play out over the course of my dissertation, the genitive variants of function provide the grammar governing what might *slip the rules* of our readily accepted conceptions of function. To clarify, mine is not a terminological quarrel. Rather, it is a conceptual entanglement in which I, certainly not discounting standard applications of function, explore how function may otherwise be conceived. My point is, the laugh track may indeed be a *function*, however our conception of function need not be restricted to or for relating a broadly understood backdrop for a things being (a part of) media.

Typically, the term *function* represents an analytical investment in a causative force, mechanism or trigger. By treating a media formation as a function the theorist commits to a course of descriptions that reinforces a frame of analysis divorced from experiencing, for my purposes, the laugh track by what it does and how it is formed independently of who or what productive regimen it may serve. In this respect, Michel Foucault's account of the archive in his *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, though focused on discourse formation, points the way for engaging the specificity of things *un*filtered by the scrim-effect of a generalized notion of media. For Foucault, the archive is not a particular discourse or instrument of discourse, nor a platform or medium – the point being, the archive is not an isolable and potential sequence of intersecting events on a timeline. Foucault shifts focus away from conceiving of media formations etiologically and as relationally bound. He gets us to attend to the force and formation of a system. Alternatively, he calls the archive a *system of its functioning.* In this way, functioning

precedes epistemological import and our accounting for productive gain. Functioning refers back to the system it forms indicating that and how things are being operationalized. In this sense, we engage *function* as the ongoing re-instituting of particular determinations that maintain a system as formation or process. Accordingly, whether for discourses or media, we explore formations non-causally. That is, as procedural or in terms of things that are *of* rules and generative of rules.

In step with Foucault, as stated above, Zielinski unfetters media and invention from knowable and determining conditions. He explores media formations unbounded by the epistemic parameters that comprise the more conservative accounts of media archaeologists like Wolfgang Ernst who limits his analysis to what can be *seen* and *said*. Alternatively, Zielinski rejects treating media inventions as formations that operate only within the goals of functionalist practices, techniques and technological ideals. Accordingly, I contend in Part Three: "Zielinski's media *an*archaeology attends to inventions as their own practices, techniques and possible ideals that may have nothing to do with ergonomic or optimal *design* for achieving system functionality. Zielinski, within the inventive process encounters possibilities of *de*functness. This is not to say he discovers that particular media may become defunct, unusable or obsolescent. Rather, unusability and *de*functness *is a possibility of an* invention. Within the genesis of any media formation is the potential for an unaccounted for and inexplicable impotency." Challenging the generative and, to use a gamer expression, completionist presumption of media as a *function predicate* we may instead investigate the traits, integral to a broader and perhaps lesser determined technological condition, that ensure a system of archivation is *in*accessible. Further to my assessments of Zielinski my general point is that: "ways of considering *function* and *use* may be expanded. Within the purported functioning elements of a system are *other-*functioning, perhaps non-functioning, elements. Thus, what functions is not only to be reckoned

with in terms of a system's designed operations. Perhaps we may also understand a system's workings, whether or not by design, by its non-transformative elements."

Project Challenges

Given the conceptual elasticity of uselessness, the fostering of an expansive vision of the archive as anarchive, destabilizing the standard notion of function, one of my main struggles was with how to actually construct or organize the text. That is, more than the challenges to the terms and conditions for examining technological media formations, how could I make my dissertation into a system of assemblage that did not endorse nor readily comply with theories and analyses which are organized around the gravitational pull or potency of systems, and no less, around certain potent systems of thinking – in other words, it struck me as problematic, even contradictory, that I might be advancing a decisive and robust account of something so inconsequential and indeterminately unproductive as uselessness.

Though I do not spend time overtly working through the machinations of Georg Bataille's notion of excess[7] and Martin Heidegger's reflections on the modern technological condition,[8] in so many ways, their, what I consider, potency-oriented analyses, are influential for both my dissertation and for the theories of many of the thinkers I do directly engage. In fact, it may be argued that Bataille's Hegelian system-busting notion of a general economy that engenders unproductive expenditure and Heidegger's existential analytic concerning the essence

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[7] See Georges Bataille's *The Accursed Share*, Volume 1-3. Robert Hurley, trans. MIT Press, 1993.

[8] See Martin Heidegger's *The question concerning technology*, and other essays William Lovitt trans. New York : Harper & Row, 1977.

of technology authorizes my particular exploration of uselessness and the laugh track. On the one hand, my notion of uselessness as flummoxing absolute impertinence and unbounded disposability, like those afforded by Bataille's volatile materialist reality in which a society's needless sacrifices or excesses in rituals of giving represent untamed forces that defy, wreck and over-ride the regulated metrics of the punctilious bean-counter's balance sheet for the reconciling of profits and losses, reaches past strictures of reason. On the other hand, by exploring the laugh track as an archival media system pre-determined by a reflexive technicity I may also be read as following Heidegger's thinking that our being in the world, independent of any conscious deliberation, is technologically enframed, a standing reserve.

No doubt, for exploring uselessness and the laugh track, Heidegger and Bataille provide much guidance for unearthing certain ontological and materialist pre-determinations. However, at uselessness' most troublesome conceptualization is a sense of impotency. Uselessness, as I explored within a mediatic system, may be immeasurable, without quantifiability. My thinking here is that the unquantifiable "form" and "force"[9] of a system, its unspecifiable lack, that is to say *its uselessness*, eludes the very potent implicit pre-cedent conceptual frameworks offered by Bataille and Heidegger. Certainly, Bataille and Heidegger, in very different ways, in their respective accounts of unproductive expenditure and the essence of technology, point towards a lack. Heidegger's examination of technology, all at once, brings attention to the potency and impotency of this gathering or mode of ordering that makes the world a host of resources. Technology is not just a dominant presence, it is sheer presence. And its robustness occurs at the expense of man being *at play* in the world. Thus, the modern technological condition

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[9] Throughout my dissertation "form" and "force" as well as "system" are frequently deployed. No less than as I do with "function" these terms may be exposed to similar questioning.

incapacitates or renders impotent other possibilities of being in the world. In contrast, Bataille brings our attention to what cannot be controlled – to the very forces that our rules before which standards for determination, systems for ordering, containing and restricting will always falter. He brings attention to super-abundant energies, to excesses that are, implicitly and explicitly, an exertion indicating other and unknowable systems of allowances. By Heidegger's account of technological orderings and by Bataille's vision of uncontrollable economic systems, impotence is always implicit as an un-desired and unavoidable consequence. I have no truck with the fact they do not directly explore impotence as a part of a mode, mechanism or system. Ultimately, my problem with these two thinkers is that their sense of lack is circumscribed by, for Heidegger dwelling, and for Bataille expanding within – the always emerging determinations of what is potent.

Alternatively, two anarchists along with two post-structuralists permit more effectively engaging the possibilities of the non-potential of impotence. Agamben's gesture that suspends the means/end calculus, Zielinski's anarchive that expands archivation into unreachable temporalities, Derrida's deconstruction that trips up of Condillac's linguistic system as unavoidably hosting an aporia and Foucault's idea that historical discourses play out in accordance with a lawless circuitry of the archive all opened up conceptual paths that unlocked analysis of the laugh track media formation from commitments to philosophical determinations for what is knowable and possible. Further, specifically thinking through Agamben's notion of gesture and Zielinski's poetic engaging of invention, I came to conceive of structuring my dissertation so that it put into question maintaining a standard functionality and goal of its textual parts. Beyond the usual progressive academic partitioning of the text that advances through such mechanisms as table of contents, introductions, main parts, chapters, titles, sub-

passages/footnotes, appendices, references, in three distinct areas of the text I made trope and gesture of the *bracketed, the abyss* and an infinitely looping *archive.* That is, in parallel with the designated three parts that formally organize the whole of the dissertation, I offered three divergent elements that break with the continuity of a particular academic format for analysis. Accordingly, the potency of argument that is implicitly executed by a contiguity or integrity of assemblage is fractured by three very overt and distinct gestures.

To close out my prefatory remarks I will briefly outline the nature of these gestures. The entirety of Part Two titled *Laughing Outside the Box*, sandwiched in-between the theoretical groundwork focused Part One and the speculative musings of Part Three, was placed in parentheses. Apart from the object of analysis being the history of the laugh track the graphic partitions place the contents of Part Two within the broadcast industry practice for cueing the sitcom editor to insert laughter. Through this graphic trope, the history of the laugh track may thus be severed from the main of the dissertation. It interrupts the overall narrativo-philosophical mediation. Instead, we bump into the laugh track history – from Bing Crosby to *M*A*S*H** to Charley Douglas' Laff Box – as its own mediatic congestion, of a collision of rules that are somehow in formation. Independent of this parenthetical gesture, coming on the heels of Chapter Twelve in which I examine various computer/algorithmic conundrums (glitch areas, integer overflow, the Donkey Kong kill-screen and programmed Easter eggs), in the would-be chapter thirteen – I say would-be because it is an un-chaptered section – the text stands as a frivolous gesture. Nested within the very fabric of my broader analytical engagement we are taken on a pointless Easter-egg treasure hunt for a truth that is sidebar and yet significant for its being sidebar. Rather frivolously, in *A Pre-programmed Abyss...* I lead the reader down a rabbit-hole in

which I explore a notion of *the frivolous*. Lastly, the third gesture comes at the end of the dissertation in the form of an appendix. I transform the Archive of American Television's on-line audio recorded interview with laugh track sound engineer Carroll Pratt into its own Laff Box. In the spirit of Friedrich Kittler's Marshall McNietzsche's reflexive engagement with the typewriter, this officially sanctioned archived material is made into a mechanico-textual temporo-numeric trope of itself. It re-codifies its material registry as a redundant system of archivation. With each of these three gestures the text slackens its theoretical flexing and muscularity. Much like with the affects of laughter these moments and passages within the text derail the laugh track – a uselessness in reserve – from being conceived as a formulation unified and potent within a system of purpose and meaning.

Introduction

A Circumscribed Technicity

The broader objective of my analysis is to explore the possibility of uselessness in the actual functioning of media. The laugh track represents an instance of a media formation that eludes operating by notions of use or exchange value. However the theoretical framework by which it has been conceived as a cultural phenomenon has no use for exploring the possibility of uselessness. Alternatively, I propose an analysis that focuses on the laugh track's archival and technological properties. This shift from a qualitative-type assessment to an engagement with a medium's quantificatory mechanisms permits, as I shall explicate, encountering the ordering of its inventive process. We thus move from a human-authorized version of media to one in which media is explored as auto-generative. Of course, this move does not then justify a general pronouncement on *uselessness* as being an inhabitant of the realm of the *non-cultural*. Nor does it cinch the laugh track as being inherently useless. For starters, *uselessness*, of which there can be no decisive definition, is not necessary to a technological formation. In short, uselessness is not necessarily necessary. However, as we will come to consider, uselessness represents a conundrum to the way in which *purpose* and *useful*, by a certain logic, are often conceived. I will return later to a more sustained account of uselessness after discussing how to approach the laugh track. For that I will examine Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of Etienne Bonnot de Condillac's notion of *the frivolous*. At any rate, the laugh track, as the technological reserve of laughs, can never achieve its promised mediatic prowess of replicating the live. The laugh track's portended immediacy is always stunted by its very mechanicality. Instead, rendering laughter as tool means the laugh track can only ever be a by-product of repetition and quantification.

Nonetheless, the conversation does not end here. The pre-stunting of the laugh track's historical transformation as media configuration opens onto very penetrating questions about how the laugh track is a by-product manufactured within a broader system of storage and transferability. And, how, as auto-generative formation, it may modulate its own limits, its mediation. Thinking the laugh track as a system of exhaustion that is a productive resource of exhausted material thus requires approaching media by directly engaging how it is technologically constituted. This, however, means going against a formidable system for absorbing technology within the theoretical machinations of cultural history. Accordingly, we first need to do a certain amount of theoretical undoing.

Literature specific to the laugh track often either relies on or assumes a certain ineffable potency that has been attributed to laughter by certain 20th century philosophers. In spite of populist characterizations of being a universal language, *laughter* is analyzed for its non-linguistic or extra-discursive impact. Laughter has been theorized by philosopher Henri Bergson[10] as a relief mechanism in the socialization process. Conversely, laughter has been declared by Georges Bataille[11] as radically sovereign non-productive expenditure that neither reinforces social order, nor is reducible to a communicative act. For both Bergson and Bataille, laughter is thought more in terms of a bodily gesture than by the determinations of spoken language. It is considered a rupture to the economy of rules governing discursive practices. Manifest as spasms, both auditory and bodily, laughter is thus felt as independent of, and, even as a violation of reason and regulated behaviour. Tinged by either the analyses of Bergson or Bataille (at least within the Humanities), laughter, as the mechanical auditory construct of the

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[10] See Henri Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*.
[11] See Georges Bataille's *Inner Experience.*

broadcast industry's regime of production, is then truly a mischievous force. At once, laughter is a fake and dupe feature of entertainment while being a representation of an implicit unspeakable viscerality, a catalyst that is "seriously" felt as integral to the human experience. The laugh track truly has peculiar status. We note that all sorts of production elements of TV, radio, cinema are "cheated" or entail optical or aural trickery of some kind, but the laugh track has often been[12] dubbed an unnecessary add-on. It is considered external to production in its assumed and industry imposed representation of what and how an attending audience would "genuinely" respond. Effectively, for laugh track theorists, this tension between the counterfeit and what is *essential* and/or *real* puts one in an awkward theoretical position**.** It involves treating this recorded track as a diegetic, extra-diegetic or "faked essential response." [13]

Analysis of the laugh track is well-rooted in explanatory models for media that, by pushing canned laughter to the margins of their classificatory methods and explanations, have made the laugh track into a trope of technicity. Further**,** the laugh track has been brought into the discursive fold of cultural historical analysis as a superfluous industry gimmick. It has questionable import for and impact on the broadcast experience. Accordingly, from the 8th edition of the Bloomsbury Dictionary of Media and Communication, we find a somewhat pejorative account,

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[12] We note with Sound and Performance theorist Jacob Smith that recorded laughter was received quite differently prior to the laugh track. The era of broadcasting provides the frame of another politic between audience and broadcast transmission. It supported a new ideal of the real and verisimilitude readily centred out as a dubious studio tactic compared to other so-called effects that at worst may be dismissed as 'cheesy' or a tired trope for playing up cheap sentiment.

[13] This is, no doubt, to presume that there is a condition of verisimilitude, as well as that laughter is its own force or medium of communication.

It [canned laughter] functions as a stimulus to audience laughter with the

hint that all of us listening or watching are finding the programme funny.

There is no room on the laugh track for the dissenting sounds of those who

wish to express a contrary view. (Bloomsbury Dictionary of Media and

Communication, 154)

Within the hierarchy of cultural knowledge, the laugh track is assigned the fate of a supplement.

There is parallel here with the Bergson/Bataille theorizing of laughter as unscripted visceral

outburst. The laugh track, regardless of being established within the practices of broadcast

production, is seen to violate respectable productivity as gauged by standards of verisimilitude

and authentic communication. In all, the laugh track is grasped as the manipulative broadcast

industry's[14] by-product. Entirely artificial in kind, it executes a sinister objective to condition an

audience response. As we shall explore, not all theorists align with the Bloomsbury definition,

nonetheless, this negative sentiment prevails. For a number of theorists, the laugh track mostly

underscores and masks the broadcast industry's insecurities and greedy designs on profits. At

any rate, although one readily marginalizes the laugh track by the manner in which it may be

characterized as instrument within an industry's productive process, it still gets assigned a

positivistic status. It is thus validated through being a fraud, a baldly deceptive tool for the

representation of an idealized audience. Accordingly, the laugh track is fixed within the domain

of cultural knowledge both as a derided form of expression and as "technical device."[15] It is

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[14] Ironically, the industry is the standard-bearer of realism.

[15] The theoretical path for the laugh track then appears rather crooked. Quirkily, due to its being only a machine replication (a re-recording even) of a "universal human expression" it effectively violates what true laughter is felt as. Its positivity, its mediacy, is thus cast by theorists as an inherent failure. Even so, at each turn the general idea is that the laugh track remains productive. In short, to the media theorist the laugh track has a status as a cultural entity.

knowable. It is a "thing" of knowledge that relays a truth about the character and quality of a

particular ideological or ontological kind of broadcast transmission experience.

However, in its presumed transparency as a function within a productive apparatus, the

laugh track's culturally rationalized technicity actually serves to mark our deafness, perhaps even

dumbness, towards its material history as a media formation. I contend, though, that the very

absorption of the laugh track within the positivist frame of a media knowledge production

apparatus is not simply an omission due to a theoretical blind spot amongst cultural history

biased media theorists. Rather, the readable cultural play of a laughter-producing device is

implicitly but necessarily marked against an assumed category of *nonknowledge*. This category

represents the "incomprehensibly monotonous mechanical operation" for generating sounds of

laughter. As such, this "mechanical operation" that holds place for a productive *nonknowledge*

apparently never needs to be examined. The laugh track is readily relegated to being a technical

invention in service of a generalized desire. It is a base formation at the margins of the cultural

historian's knowledge production process. Effectively then, a line is drawn at the laugh track's

brute mechanicality.[16] In the best of senses, the *machine* and its essence become proper name for

representing the contemporary world's smart tools and/or creative engineering.[17] The machine is

positively cast with the purpose of facilitating fluid and live forms of creativity, feeling and

meaningful communication. It would appear then that the laugh track is a media formation

caught in the midst of a theoretical conundrum. It is a conundrum in that, in virtue of attempting

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[16] In ironic parallel to the media theorists, it is the very mechanicality that laughter, as social sanction according to Henri Bergson at least allegedly, puts in relief.

[17] The media analysis of cultural historians (certain ones at least) mirrors the early classic cinema machine trope as being the source of humorous calamity and fascination. –We recall the faceless unrelenting system of order and control emblematic of the industrialized factory against which Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, respectively in *Moderns Times* and *The Electric House* among other famous works, struggle to preserve their humanity.

to render laughter as productive resource, the laugh track is a technological contrivance that necessarily fails (us).[18]

The Question of *Function*

As we shall explore in Part Two, some theorists have greatly advanced the research and analysis of the laugh track. Ultimately, however, the *status quo* definition penned by *Bloomsbury* is maintained. The laugh track is simply understood by how it and for what it functions.[19] The laugh track is readily assigned the status of a mechanism for performing and doing something to then be analyzed within a productive frame of media theory.[20] As just outlined, we enter the research and attendant analytic, as already sanctioned within the domains of media studies and burgeoning digital humanities. The "laugh track," loosely referenced within the category of studio effects, is considered merely as an entertainment trigger device. Bluntly put, the laugh track is presumed to be constituted as a *function*.[21]

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[18] The "necessarily fails us" is a conundrum in that failure is unproductive to us.

[19] Specifically in terms of what is absent in the audience's experience of a broadcast mediated production.

[20] For an account of the generative epistemological undergirdings of media theory in Communication Studies see Kęstutis Kirtiklis' "Communication Alone. Epistemology and Methodology as Typological Criteria of Communication Theories." Informacijos Mokslai. Issue 58, 2011.

[21] In attributing "function-hood" to the laugh track what is mostly focussed on is the necessity of its presence as simulated immediacy of response. That is, on how the laugh track constitutes and influences the at-home audience's experience. This focal point or rationale for its being a mainstay element of sitcoms (among other productions) is peculiar. As what seems to give the laugh track its troublesome appeal is the quality of its presence, which lends a sense of an inherently fraught experience. I point this out because, as prominent sound theorist Jacob Smith

The investments of a culturo-historical approach that automatically posits the laugh track as *function* opens us onto a primary organizing problematic for Part One of this dissertation. Through my analysis, I am attempting to grapple with how uselessness is debarred from the discussion of media. Hence, there is an undercurrent of persistent questioning and challenging of standard conceptions of the notion "function." In terms of *function*, I focus on what we mean and assume or take for granted. I certainly do not claim that the word is being misused by media theorists. Rather, I question the presumed authority that ascribing something as a "function" bestows upon a media device, element, etc. That is, either for giving explanatory force to one's account or for making sense of the role and purpose of a mediatic activity. Instances of the use of the term "function" [22] are rampant throughout the various texts that I look at. By and large, from

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contends, disembodied laughter uncannily tricks us (or at least appears to) into participation alongside an imaginary audience. Interestingly then, what is at stake for theorists is the laugh track's lack of presence and lack of immediacy or rather its particular kind of mediacy. And yet, so far, we have only approached it through an analytic that absorbs the "counterfeit" laughter producing mechanism within a broader notion of media. What is pushed to the forefront of analysis is the laugh track's purpose as a "live" simulator or active function within cultural history (i.e., TV entertainment). Again though, we never consider how it is possible that this "source" of or "contributor" to our anxiety or being ill-at-ease is constituted.

[22] From the Merriam Webster Dictionary we know the first use of "function" to be in 1533. It's derived from the "Latin *function-, functio* performance, from *fungi* to perform; probably akin to Sanskrit *bhuṅkte* he enjoys." Philosopher/mathematician G.W. Leibnitz, in 1673, theorized function specifically "differentiable function" (for relating changes in measurement) as a basis for his calculus and half century later mathematician Johann Benoulli refined "function" as being an expression indicating mathematical variability and constants. The social anthropologist Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, also considered to be the founder of structural functionalism, in 1935 wrote the essay "On the Concept of Function in Social Science" (see the journal *The American Anthropologist*). Indebted to Durkheim Radcliffe-Brown declares: "As the word function is here being used the life of an organism is conceived as the *functioning* of its structure. It is through and by the continuity of the functioning that the continuity of the structure is preserved. If we consider any re-current part of the life-process, such as respiration, digestion, etc. its function is the part it plays in, the contribution it makes to, the life of the life of the organism as a whole." And further on "The concept of function as here defined thus involves the notion of a *structure* consisting of a *set* or *relations* amongst *unit entities*, the *continuity* of the structure being maintained by a *life-process* made up of the *activities* of the constituent units."

The Bloomsbury Dictionary of Media and Communication to any number of the topic relevant analyses, media theorists deploy (make function of) "function" as either the following kind of noun or verb: "the laugh track is a function of ...;" or, "the laugh track functions to ..." My plan is to question if *function* is to only be circumscribed by a mechanism's doing of something, achieving an outcome, actualizing a potential, or, in keeping with my project, being of use. To reiterate my prefatory remarks, I do not plan to discount or dissolve *function* through such an examination, but to explore how it may otherwise be conceived. In other words, how malleable is our conception of *function* and how important is it for thinking about media? And further, when one refers to an "operation" or manner of functioning, what investments in causative explanations, usefulness, or, at least, potential for a particular outcome, are being made? Over the course of my analysis, I entertain function's variants as theorized across the formulations: *functioning*; *functionaries*; and, *defunct*. Directly applied to canned laughter, we will explore *if* and *how* laugh tracks are inescapably circumscribed by some notion of function.

Analyzing function brings us to the nub of my thesis with respect to how we may experience contemporary media. Need our experience only be circumscribed by instrumentalist thinking? To depart from analyzing media in instrumental terms, I draw on Giorgio Agamben's account of *the gesture*.[23] His idea is that by being open to things as gestures, rather than by how they may be devised to mediate (the world for us), we may experience things *as if* in their immediacy. Considering, for instance, his exploration of language, Agamben offers that we may experience language independently of the purposive and propositional confines of discourse and

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We also note function along with form became the 20th century modernist's mantra for marking and perhaps marketing architectural design against the perceived excesses of their predecessors.
[23] See Agamben, Giorgio. "Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*," "Notes on Politics," in *Means Without Ends*: *Notes on Politics*. Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti, trans. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

discursive orders by which language is fettered. As a gesture, language is well other than a "means to an end" limited to being a vehicle of communication or a holder of information. Agamben gets us to engage language as a "pure means."[24] That is, as *a doing* that is generative of unknown possibilities and the experience that may come with such. In effect, I wish to see how his thinking on *the gesture* applies to media and technology. To be clear, by Agamben's gesture I am not positing a counterpoint to function. It does not signify an opposition. However, gesture does diverge from the orbit of instrumentalist and propositional framing by which we may declare something to be a function. Rather, a gesture, as thought by Agamben, does not offer a statement on things. As will be explored, the gesture represents an alternative mode of engagement to the orthodoxy for positing the laugh track as mediating function. Further, when putting into practice a form of media archaeology, it will help to engage the aporetic constitution of the laugh track.

The Laugh Track as Archive

No doubt, to some, the above characterization of the laugh track as trope of technicity collapses as a highly laughable form of caricatured contemporary reflexivity. Nonetheless, by lumping it in with a category of meaningless mechanical objects, it does point to a sustained strategy for actively negating the laugh track's material presence. My project, however, involves examining the laugh track as a mechanical object. Specifically, as pertains to the technical operations and specificity of the laugh track as its own historical material formation. This formation, I contend, does not come into being by the knowledge/nonknowledge binary scripting of media studies. It is not a product of the ethos and discursive methodology of history conceived

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[24] Ibid.

in terms of culturally meaningful practices and purposes. Instead, at the margins of knowledge production, so cast and prepared by discursive explanatory accounts, we may encounter the formation of the laugh track as a peculiar reserve. One that makes play of, perhaps as serious humor, the material operation of electro-cum-techno-archival systems. Thus, following Agamben's philosophizing of the gesture, I explore the distinct history of the laugh track as a discrete media formation.

Before further discussion of the laugh track as divergent from the conceptual orthodoxy of media and Communication Studies, I emphasize that my orientation towards a material-based exploration of the laugh track is not rooted in an inverse logic. To reiterate, my intentions are, as stated in the Preface, toward taking an open-ended approach. Particular to the laugh track as a reserve of uselessness, rather than trying to arrive at a definitive position, my interest is for exploring how (by a discourse that permits such, as it were) we may think about technology and the archive. With that said, in Part One, I examine conceptions of technology and the archive in two ways. In one sense, I explore accounts of technology and of the archive as being governed by quantifying processes for organizing and ordering materiality. In another sense, I consider how technology and the archive as discrete formations may be broadly thought in terms of an implicit ordering (that though supportive of quantificatory schemas is not reducible to such). No doubt, especially in that I will be working by the logic of particular media archaeologists, there will certainly be difficulties in distinguishing the organizational characteristics and doings of the archive from the workings of technology. However, though the classical archive (be it as contemporary public institution) is very much a complex technological operation, the archive is,

also, as Michel Foucault reminds us,[25] a temporal and historical registry relating past, present and future being and becoming. In fact, for Foucault the archive is a system that maintains (and transforms as and by) its own logic. It is a pre-conceptual structuring formation permitting subsequent knowledge and media. Foucault thus puts us in position to rethink how to account for media. By terms that may be neither instrumentalist nor reliant on tropes of function. Still, the notion of function is not made irrelevant to our analytic. Rather we may instead conceive it differently from being a causal and a purposive indicator. Needless to say, Foucault's account of the archive holds promise for opening onto an alternative account of function.

Media Archaeology and Temporal Regimes

> The audiences that produced the roars, titters, and chuckles of the canned laugh tracks these shows splice into their tapes, the gags that set them off, the actors delivering the lines, the shows themselves – have all long since passed on, many of them dead and buried literally as well as figuratively. But the laughter they produced or elicited has been immortalized electronically and is used over and over in shows distributed throughout the nation, throughout the world. (Rose Kohn Goldsen, *The Show and Tell Machine*, 68-69)

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[25] See Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge.*

Influenced by Rose Kohn Goldsen's statement "But the laughter they produced or elicited has been immortalized electronically and is used over and over in shows distributed throughout the nation, throughout the world" I propose considering laugh tracks to be structured as their own databases. The focus now becomes how individuated laugh tracks potentially contribute to, by obliquely formed systems of repetition, an ever-expanding program of *anonymous* and *dispersive* archivation. By this thinking, I plan to examine laughter's materio-technological transformations by exploring *how* the very mechanisms for designing such an archival system of imitation are and have been at work. When studying "canned laughter," we are confronted with a process that is *always already* technologically mediated. Thereby, the focus shifts away from what the laugh track may represent as, within the culturo-political economy of broadcasting, an auditory gestural performance.[26] We, instead, look to explore the laugh track in its own domain of electromagnetic inscription. In the simplest sense, laugh tracks are sound assemblages of recognized, appropriated, described and catalogued types of laughter (i.e., giddy, nervous, riotous). The laugh track media formation is an archival system. It is a particularly configured temporality. By this thinking, the laugh track not only occurs in a generalized time (of media and history), it is also a time-making registry activated by its *own* temporal regime.

In Parts Two and Three, re-orienting the discussion of the laugh track as archival formation, I will rely on the approaches of certain media archaeologists. Their non-linear and non-narrative approach brings us closer to experiencing the laugh track and media more as Agamben's idea of a "pure means." They help to bring some clarity to the generative forces that organize and determine our experience. Wolfgang Ernst explains this approach in detail:

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[26] The voicing of sentiment likely directed at a humorous situations.

Media archaeology understood as an analysis of epistemological
configurations (both machinic and logic) does not simply seek a
redemption of the crude beginnings of forgotten or misread media of the
past, nor is it confined to a reconstruction of the crude beginnings and
prehistories of technical media. Rather than being a nostalgic collection of
"dead media" of the past, assembled in a curiosity cabinet, media
archaeology is an analytical tool, a method of analyzing and presenting
aspects of media that would otherwise escape the discourse of cultural
history. As long as media are not mistaken for the mass-media content,
they turn out to be non-discursive entities, belonging to a different
temporal regime that, to be analyzed, requires an alternative means of
description. (Wolfgang Ernst, "Media Archaeography," 240)

Ernst departs from approaches that ascribe purpose or function to a technological device or
object. Instead, Ernst directs us to consider how the highly active, technologically coercive
generative processes, independent of historical placement, maintain and permit particular modes
of information transmission and storage. In this approach it then becomes necessary to explore
media as their own formations of rules, protocols, temporalities and time-limiting processes.
Ernst further explains:

With an extended concept of the archive, a media-archaeological
approach to the past must mean that media cannot be made into
"historical" objects of research only. Different media systems,
from library catalogs to microfilming, have influenced the content as well

as the understanding of the historical remains of the archive itself

(Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory*, 28).

Media archaeology opens onto the possibility of exploring historical formations by being attentive to a medium's particular generative operations. Accordingly, I will focus on the proliferation of laugh tracks as that which have been generated by their *own* formation of archival procedures. By this reflexive *archivological* analytic, I thus explore the laugh track as a non-discursive process with its own materio-archival formation, one that may be conceived as its own *self*-regulating mediating force.

Techniques of Knowledge (problematic methodology for the laugh track)

Re-setting the terms for an historical account of the laugh track is no real victory of one methodology over another. It is not the trumping of cultural history in favor of that possessing a rudimentary and non-speculative constitution wherein the laugh track is then somehow grasped in its *pure state*. If anything, it is its own problematic. The laugh track experienced through media archaeology actually triggers challenges to how we may think of "generativity." Further, questions arise, at the mathematical limits or very thresholds of mechanized temporal containments, over the authorizing mechanisms of Ernst's form of media archaeology. Ernst's media archaeology, in effect, leads us to *questionable limits*. His theoretical reflexivity, as applied to *the archive* and his general emphasis on measured time, is instructive for launching a non-narrative history of the laugh track. However, Ernst's form of media archaeology leaves little room for considering the formation of machines apart from being organized by an actualized notion of what they are designed to do. Fortunately, media archaeology also serves as

springboard to a more radicalized or anarchic analytic of media formations. Conversely, I gain

traction by Siegfried Zielinski's media *an*archaeology. Zielinski's approach dwells within the

shadows of processes that subvert their own registration mechanisms for archivation. Through

media anarchaeology, I may navigate the utter and perverse pointlessness of the laugh track as

system of archivation. The point being, considered this way, the laugh track eludes being

described from an estimable point of mechanical production and reproduction. To put otherwise,

an account that *only* ascribes to media a practicable generative directive is of "no use" for

formations with unplanned redundancies. As I will develop in Part Three, canned laughter entails

an archival structure of production whose object is made purposeful by making useless its being

purposeful. Zielinski's formulation of the anarchive permits us to grasp how the archival system

that hosts the excesses of laughter is a perversion of its *law of rules*. Zielinski thus helps to

articulate where and how, beyond the regulatory mechanism of the archive, such a law may

always already be broken. That is, for how a mediatic system limitlessly regulates its content and

its systematic programmability through, not only (re)producing more laugh track (as the systems

of itself) but by multiplying its processes for replicating laughter, for how as archive the laugh

track becomes the quantified repeating of repetition itself.

Media *An*archaeology and the Inaccessibility of Certain Possible Quantification

Media archaeology *begins* by rejecting the idea that history can be reduced to tidy

narratives.[27] It also insists that techniques of analysis need be developed to describe media

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[27] See Wolfgang Ernst's "Media Archaeography: Method and Machine versus History and Narrative of Media," Media Archaeology:Approaches, Applications, and Implications. Erkki Huhtamo, Jussi Parikka eds. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011, pp. 239–255.

formation by its particular materiality.[28] Furthermore, it locates the very possibility of analysis in

techniques born of the very technology media archaeologists seek to analyze.[29] Thereby,

accounts of canned laughter, and more generally any media formation, are in some way or

another determined by the very terms and rules governing the operations of machines. Like

Wolfgang Ernst, Siegfried Zielinski considers media formations as discrete temporal regimes.

However, emphasizing the need to explore the variety of inventive processes that support media

formations, Zielinski, far more than Ernst, treats both "temporality" and "regimes" as *entirely*

discrete. Zielinski professes a need for accounting for media that, apart from contending with the

mechanics of a mediatic device, explores its formation as processes that may entail a kind of

under-calculus. That is, a discrete system may defy a standard time measurement represented by

the predictive logics of algorithmic computation. Put another way, Zielinski, who systematically

challenges the authority of the archival record,[30] is very suspicious of the general frame by which

the media archaeologist Ernst presumes an *arche* or origin. For Ernst, the archive prescribes the

source of what may come into being as media. If anything, as Zielinski tells us, media

formations, including supportive materials (i.e., documents deemed particular to an invention) as

well as archives themselves, are at best indicators of what may not be contained in a record, but

part of the invention process.

To slow the forward movement of Ernst's media archaeology, Zielinski introduces the

idea of recessive or non-phenotypic elements in media formations. He gets us to grapple with

"trial and error" as being useful and *maybe* not so useful. Not all inventions "see the light of

day," nor do all inventions work. However, non-realized, non-working media are still, in some

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[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] The archive is often presumed as the object/artefact sanctioning or purpose-giving authority.

fashion, *of* media history and more importantly are *of*, in some way or another, the general processes of making and inventing.[31] They should not be readily discounted from the makings and workings of machines in current or past circulation. Furthermore, Zielinski also prompts us to explore elements of media formation beyond the narrow strictures of seeming relevance. Commenting on the task of the *an*archaeologist in accounting for the rich mixture of disciplines and interests that often inform an invention Zielinski writes,

> Magical, scientific and technical praxis do not follow in chronological sequence for anarchaeology; on the contrary, they combine at particular moments in time, collide with each other, provoke one another, and, in a way, maintain tension and movement within developing processes. When heterogeneous approaches meet, openings appear that, in the long term, may even result in relatively stable technical inventions. Porta's experiments to sound out the media possibilities of the camera obscura in staging his theatrical performance of moving images with sound or his rotating cryptographic devices are examples of this as well as Kircher's combinatorial boxes for mathematical calculations and musical compositions or Ritter's discoveries about electricity and chemical processes. (Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media*, 258-259)

A media invention, regardless of it being destined for a particular use and having a genesis within a particular ordering of technology may, as Zielinski shows, be inspired, informed or influenced by completely divergent discourses, musings and activities, for example, interests in spiritism, mysticism, arcane poetics and fleeting feelings of love. Zielinski's anarchaeology runs

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[31] Of course, being a part of the process does not necessarily mean being of use.

appositional to Ernst's positivist genetic plan. He rejects an arche-geneticism that gets instituted as the temporal ordering mechanism of an archaeology of media artefacts. Instead, Zielinski gets us to consider what is assumed (as useless) and yet haunts Ernst's temporal regimes. He responds by instituting an *an*archegenesis (of materialism)*,* a recessive gene in the very workings of a regime, practice, in effect, an invention. This greatly complicates, sometimes through a hidden subtraction, the reductive mathematical and instrumentalist thinking by which media is conceived. As such, if Ernst would lead us to focus on the operations of the laugh track in terms of quantifiable, future-making auto-generative instances, Zielinski's would get us to reconsider its very form of generativity. Perhaps, co-extensively with a medium's being quantifiable, the laugh track engenders a pre-disposed *de*functness or temporal recess. In other words, we are challenged to explore how a medium may host a trace of an impossible-to-trace function (perhaps a non-function). In this way, the future of an invention is that which is never, within the temporal dimension of its *in perpetuity* un-thought, to be disclosed.[32]

The Frivolous, Function and Function as Frivolous

Zielinski is a great help for opening an analytic onto an *un*-economy of inventive forces that expands the study of media beyond measuring how they are generated and generative. In effect, he gets us to question an implicit *use/useless* binary while opening onto less determinate forms of a media's history (which of course doesn't simply focus one on "the past"). Specifically, Zielinski's work gets us to identify the application of a use/useless metric in media

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[32] Zielinski entertains catachresis (at the origin of things) as imbuing temporality in re-experiencing the measurable and productive.

archaeological description while entertaining descriptions that permit exploring seemingly lesser

potent, even impotent, modalities within rules governing invention. For Zielinski, the value of

these modalities remains inestimable. Akin to Agamben's account of *the gesture* as radically

indeterminate, by Zielinski's particular explorations of media, or would-be media, we are never

in a position to posit impotencies as some form of inventive counter-force or resistance inspired

by, or for fuelling, creation. In other words, media may elude operating by use or exchange

value. Following the tenor of Zielinski's questioning and his challenges to and within media

archaeology (*vis a vis* media *an*archaeology) we are inspired to consider how uselessness may

be, non-oppositionally, a part of utility. That is, how *uselessness* might be accounted for in and

by our function-oriented systems of knowledge productions. Is *uselessness* just the proverbial

necessary noise that competes for channel time with the signal? – The category of uncontrolled

affect within that of controlled material effect? But given the logic of signal/noise use/waste

metrics, would that not be to simply reabsorb uselessness into being a function? Would that not

frame uselessness as a use, purpose and invariably a function within the mechanisms of

transmission and a systems structuring? The issue to address is then how to approach *uselessness*

such that it does not only and automatically get turned into another form of use and then to ask

what its actual relation, if there is one, is to use.[33]

    Jacques Derrida, in deconstructing the 18th century empiricist Etienne Bonnot de

Condillac's influential but paradoxical description of the linguistic sign (or core unit of meaning,

analogy, discourse, etc.), provides us with a rare theorized instance of uselessness as essential for

generating *human knowledge*. Derrida unpacks the unintended premise of an inescapable logic

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[33] For one: what might this say of "my" knowledge of the laugh track as, by process of repeating
items in a self-similar way, being useless?

entwining Condillac's positivist account of the structure of *a sign's* potency and worth with a sign's unquantifiable uselessness, its inherent frivolousness.

> Frivolity consists in being satisfied with tokens. It originates with the sign, or rather with the signifier which, no longer signifying, is no longer a signifier. The empty, void, friable, useless signifier ... [and further on in the passage] The sign is *disposability* ... (Jacques Derrida, *The Archeology of the Frivolous*: *Reading Condillac*, 118-119)

Here, Condillac's logic renders the structure of the sign in terms of its functional process of "emptying," specifically what he calls its *disposability*. By such, the useless or *frivolous* is, impossibly one might think, no mere by-product of signifying.[34] Rather, frivolity – the inestimably useless – must inhere in the very structure of the process of the sign's functioning. That is, in doing its work in the formation of rules, meaning, analogy, discourse, epistemes and ultimately knowledge. At any rate, not just restricted to the generative economy of Condillac's empirical linguistic system, we may have a way to engage uselessness that opens onto a different conception of function. A way that both slips the conventional implicit binary use/useless and describes the unquantifiable aspects of media formations.[35] In this sense, we may be open to the always transforming laugh track's authorization and maintenance of its own uniqueness. An uniqueness that is so by actually making laughter, with respect to the form of "laughter" as a category, generic. In effect, the laugh track's ends are always foreclosed on by its means as quantified production and re-production that override laughter's necessary implied un-quantifiability. Without question, we will need to contend with how the laugh track operates as a

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[34] The trashy bits, as it were, that get emptied in the disposal process.

[35] In an obvious sense, the process of imitation in the re-making or assembling of tracks born out of previous canned laughter appears similarly generative, or rather degenerative, to Condillac's sign unit.

double registry: physically and symbolically – marking what is to be laughed at while, by design, transforming laughter into what can no longer be felt as unruly effusion.

Part One - Cueing the Laugh Track

Introduction (for Part One)

In Part One I explore the theoretical backdrop for how the laugh track has been analyzed and provide a possible basis for how it may be analyzed. The laugh track has been primarily approached within the analytical purview of cultural history. This approach restricts engagements with media to being circumscribed by purposive indicators of cultural activity or production. Analysis is thus limited to considering what is useful and, in course, what is useless by an evaluation process that serves a program of planned or desired outcomes. I, however, wish to explore *uselessness* in less evaluative terms. I wish to explore uselessness as integral to a media formation. The laugh track, I contend, is a media formation that is predicated on making useless its production. Still, before a more detailed examination of this proposition, we need to establish the terms for approaching the laugh track. Accordingly, instead of analyzing the laugh track from a cultural-historical approach, I propose exploring it as a media formation with particular technological and archival configurations. I look to encounter the laugh track within and as a version of a materially productive system. The aim is therefore *not* to over-ride, trump, or dispose of the prior work done on the laugh track as it is to re-visit and grapple with some of the terms guiding our knowledge production. I attempt to do this by examining how we conceive of a medium (the laugh track) that, in its very material formation, presents a complex of problems for a cultural account and also by grappling with what is readily considered to be media (towards which we as theorists may direct an analytic and claim a domain of study). The key term *function*, as we shall see, raises an epistemological quandary for certain prominent models of communication. It is my contention that, in one form or another, a function or causative formulation gets posited and does more "work" for the productiveness of a schema than may be rightly assumed. As already stated, I have no interest in doing away with *function*

but rather to examine its use and to consider possible alternatives. My thinking is that the laugh track may indeed be a *function*; however, our conception of such need not be restricted to or for the relating of a broadly understood backdrop for a thing's being (a part of) media. In this respect, Michel Foucault's account of the archive will be doubly invaluable. Foucault, in his *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, though focused on discourse formation, effectively points the way for engaging the specificity of things unfiltered by the scrim affect of a generalized notion of media. And, as I shall explicate, his declaration of the archive as *the system of its functioning* inspires, while still retaining what gives traction in the historical material formation of things, a shift away from conceiving of media formations etiologically and as relationally bound. Instead, by Foucault we come to explore formations, both discursive and mediatic, as procedural or in terms of things being *of* rules and generative of rules. As departure from the main approaches taken towards the laugh track, here in Part One, I will take stock of the manner in which we may approach the terms of materiality, technology and *the archival* that inform, in the coming two parts of this thesis, an examination of the laugh track as its own kind of historical media formation.

Chapter One: The "Laugh Track" Defined

The broadcast-formatted *laugh track* signals a border between the mechanical operations of broadcasts and the recorded and/or material realization of the "creating of content" for production. As already noted in my main introduction, from the *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Media and Communication* we are provided with the general idea that the laugh track is an added and for the most part dictatorial component of the standard broadcast experience: "It functions as a stimulus to audience laughter with the hint that all of us listening or watching are finding the programme funny. There is no room on the laugh track for the dissenting sounds of those who wish to express a contrary view." Further drawing on media theorist Brett Mills (*The Sitcom,* Edinburgh University Press, 2010) *Bloomsbury* circumscribes:

> ... the laugh track "presents the audience as a mass, whose responses are unambiguous and who signal a collective understanding of what is or isn't funny." It "not only ignores alternative readings of a comedy text, but also suggests there is verbal pleasure to be had in going along with the rest of the crowd." In other words, it has ideological connotations. At the same time, says Mills, the laugh track reminds individual viewers that they are, in certain circumstances, responding differently from the crowd. (Bloomsbury Dictionary of Media and Communication, 154)

No doubt the *laugh track* is a tool for manipulation and advancement of a conformist agenda.[36] Still, what comes clear in the *Bloomsbury* definition is the formal or technical relation between the main of production and its secondary supportive elements: on the one hand, the creative content, or *the comedic text*; on the other hand, the laugh track, a contrived studio effect and external intermediary for those to whom the broadcasted programme is transmitted. Unlike music scores or sound effects that are added for dramatic or comedic effect, the laugh track is often seen as antithetical to the creative product as well as its democratically idealized form of reception.[37] In all, "canned laughter" represents the external-to-the-base-creation-of-scripted-action toiling of an audio technician. Such attempts to simulate the potential response of a "live" audience to whatever presented material thus only impose a technologically derivative gimmick on a work's broadcast transmission.

Having been posited as not only in opposition to the essence of the broadcast studio art-form and, as outlined, even an unnecessary component in an art-form's transmission, the laugh track's *use* is effectively defined as having a mediating function. Though to some not very good at mediating, it is a surrogate and stimulator or, as we shall come to examine in Part Two, even a suture. In a nutshell, the laugh track is understood by its *use* or more specifically its *function* with

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[36] With the caveat that viewers in "TV" and "radio land" might, and this seems rather ironic (ironic in that one's supposed independence results from a dependence or from an instruction to laugh), differentiate themselves from the laugh prompt by not responding in kind. The *laugh track* appears to be conceived somewhat in accordance with early Frankfurt mass media theory. As that, which by the construction of a generic-sounding audience, promotes conformity.

[37] As proffered in *Bloomsbury*, canned laughter represents a political threat by depriving the viewer the *right* to assess whether or not something is funny. It warrants their laughter while bounding a scene in set-response for consumption, thus limiting the programme's power for playing out as a work of art with potentially unlimited ways of being interpreted. It is seen as an intrusive and superfluous technological and ideological function designed to serve the interests of broadcast industry visionaries, either for a wanting to streamline the studio-recording process or for target-marketing a broadcast network's product.

respect to the valued offerings of the text as cultural production. Nonetheless, other than positing a discursive frame for which to make marginal, by *Bloomsbury* and by others to be discussed, we actually lack insight into the make-up or constitution of the laugh track as media formation. Simply put: *What is the laugh track?* [38]

The term *function* represents an analytical investment in a causative force. By treating the laugh track as a function, the theorist commits to a course of descriptions that reinforces a frame of analysis divorced from experiencing it by what it does and how it is formed independently of who or what (productive regimen) it may serve. In efforts to gain insight into the constitution of this so-readily-called "function," over the course of the following chapters, I attempt to examine *how* the laugh track may be thought and approached as a techno-archival media formation. Rather than proscribed by a rationale for it being a media formation, I instead look to explore it much like Giorgio Agamben gets us to think about *the gesture*. That is, in taking a turn towards exploring it as its own archival registry, it may be experienced as "pure means," possibly free of content and purpose. Considered this way, the laugh track is not then a trope of laughter that, for entertainment purposes, strategically serves to interrupt discourse. Certainly, as with the philosophizing of laughter by Georges Bataille and Henri Bergson, the laugh track may also be explored as an extra-discursive interruption of rule and order. However, unlike laughter, the laugh track is an aporia. Instead of being a breach of rules, it is paradoxically ruled by its being a system of exhaustion. As I will come to describe more in Part Three, the laugh track maintains its productivity through a gesture – of never-ending archival actions – that renders its product useless. For the rest of Part One I examine the laugh track's orthodox status as a *function.* In

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[38] And by no means should we take comfort in the words "media formation" nor the discourse that permits such an expression.

turn, I examine alternative approaches to a discursive model of analysis that explore technology and cultural artefacts in their discreteness.

Comedy Studies and Technology

Although *Bloomsbury* allocates space for it in their dictionary, in general, the literature on the laugh track is scant. To the 21st century theorist, that can, at a pin's drop, conduct digitally fine-tuned grazing of any cultural history's landscape, this lack must warrant an opportune smirk and chuckle. This is especially so, in a time when the conventionally so-called peripheral or secondary elements of cultural production or experience have been promoted to the foreground of analysis.[39] Of course, there is no shortage of broadcast and/or media outlets for laugh-inducing practices in contemporary culture. Actually, the forms of comedy and mechanisms for disseminating/distributing such are a major growth industry. In fact, and more to the point, these particular outlets are also the material for study. In terms of their manifold processes of conveyance, they are given considerable attention by and within many divergent academic departments, journals etc. No different than in other humanities-related disciplines, the content, comedy, is being studied in terms of its being a creative format that, in some form or another, is moulded by today's always rapidly altering technologies. Certainly, comedy *itself* is considered a serious format that engenders potentially valuable "street-level" insight into the intricacies of emergent social and political activity. However, the *technologies* are also registered as having a prime role in shaping the wit and craft of the contemporary humorist's calculations for *conveying*

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[39] For instance, see Georg Stanitzek's "Reading the Title Sequence (Vorspann, Générique)," *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Summer, 2009), pp. 44-58

the comedic message. For some time, analysis of *the comedic* has been shifting from being

largely examined as commentary and/or sentiment to engaging the particulars of the medium by

which the comedic occurs and may be constructed. The digital technologies, it is thought, are

reframing the terms by which one may research, study and forecast the problems and potentials

that the developing media's hold for traditional comedic practices.

Recent scholarship concerning what contributes to the production, dissemination and

reception of comedy – of *what makes us laugh* – engages a host of analyses as pertains to the

role of developments in contemporary technological media. Often they are: modes of digital

distribution; social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Websites, YouTube); media devices

(smart phones, digital cameras, camcorders, iPods, tablets); and popular formats for digital

representation (memes and meme culture). More specific to the technical qualities of production

and/or post-production, scholars now devote more time than ever before to analyzing changes in

camera techniques and sound recording/mixing for simulating the "live," "real" and unscripted. –

Productions (TV, On-line) deploy pixilated surveillance imagery and/or revitalized *vérité*/home-

made audio and visual camera tropes for contributing to a sense of immediacy and "liveness"

aligned with the "real-time" delivery of contemporary modes of transmission.[40] Post-production

software, in terms of expediency, array of visual and audio effects as well as content altering

capacities, is recognized as radically impacting on current and coming generations of

commercial/consumer grade comedy. Among the effects[41] at the disposal of editors is an

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[40] For an account of Reality TV and see "Cameras, Reality and *Miranda*," Frances Gray, Comedy Studies Volume 3, Issue 2, 2012.

[41] Effects have the dual status of being an additive feature for enhancement or extension of a specific production's content (perhaps justifiably by their designed relation). They are also

incredibly vast reserve, an archive if you will, of pre-recorded sounds for conceivably simulating any associated audio with any recorded visual action. – Those being sounds that accompany diegesis and off-screen environments (i.e., the Wilhelm scream, wind, street noise, etc.) and also, germane to my research, for approximating or imitating the likely audience response to the on-screen action (i.e., canned heat, canned laughter, canned clapping).

Invigorated by the ubiquity of *the cyber* and its always multiplying material edifices comedy scholars wrestle with the "techno-communicative" mechanisms as means of transmission and as a visceral extension of the "comedic body." The question often guiding research is: how do these contemporary mechanisms determine the form, content and packaging of contemporary comedic affect and relief? Thus, comedy studies, in terms of both its own formation and reception, is becoming absorbed, and perhaps un-comedically so, in(to) what

broadly thought to be a part of the category of technological mechanisms by which the content of a broadcast production is structured. By film and broadcast industry standards, and, by extension, the claims of notable theorists Tomlinson Holman, Robert L. Mott, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, the manipulation of effects is itself held as its own artistic practice. Effects, whether deployed, layered and/or mixed, are often considered to hover over a production, as if they are their own design. Though we need be mindful of the importance of theorist Michel Chion's globalist approach to cinema productions – that we cannot study a film's audio independently from its images (and I suppose vice versa) – the media theorist often attends to the practicalities specific to whatever production. Effects, though grasped as an industry assemblage, devised as being formatable to or universally substitutable for any production, are analyzed as adding to a production (and its reception) yet another (distinct) mediating element. When restricted to studying comedy, we grasp an effect by "what it does for" a comedy act. Even so, this is consistent with effects, when more broadly considered beyond comedic effect. According to the once renowned sound editor Marvin Kerner we understand:

> ... the function of sound effects is three-fold: (1) to simulate reality, (2) to add or create something off scene that is not really there, and (3) to help the director create a mood. (Marvin Kerner, *The art of the sound effects editor*, 11).

Other than in terms of its implicit instrumentality for facilitating – through simulation that supports the sense of the real – the technological is seemingly absent. Perhaps that is the effect/affect of an effect. – Effects are to be considered as technique that, more specifically as mediating tool, conceals its effecting action.

makes routine the comedic routine. No matter, comedy scholars still seek to preserve the *visceral* or bodily as central. They thereby intend to avoid full subjugation of a comic's offerings within "the technological." In effect, this is the comedy theorist's authorizing programmatic. In the introduction to the Comedy Studies journal's 2015 special issue media and comedy Peter C. Kunze makes clear,

> This special issue of *Comedy Studies* brings into focus the effects of new media on comedy production, distribution and consumption. Indeed, few subjects have been as impacted by new media to the extent comedy has. One only needs to log on to a social media platform to see a daily barrage of viral videos, memes, blog posts, witty Tweets and Facebook statuses. In the digital age, the temptation to say 'everyone's a comedian' exists, and certainly the technology exists for such possibilities to become true. At the same time, however, we must be reticent to surrender to digital utopianism. As the following essays argue, new media or, more accurately, digital media create novel opportunities and consequences for users to create, consume and study comedy. Simultaneously understanding, appreciating and critiquing these ramifications become our charge as scholars and critics of humor and comedy. (Peter C. Kunze,"Laughter in the Digital Age," *Comedy Studies*, 2015, 101)

Comedy studies, it appears, operate within a discursive regimen for reckoning *the comical* as an historically distinct human activity. The comical is, though set in relation to, separable from the mechanical or automated systems by which it gets proliferated. An analysis of comedy thus proceeds by reading "the technological" and the comedic as two distinct but given *functions* of

the other, so-operating in relation to the other. The general point being that, although forms of media are acknowledged as giving shape to content, media is still parsed from content as a tool for content's conveyance and reception.

"Theorizing" the "Laugh Track"[42]

> Drawing on previous literature on the historical development of this device and on current practices in TV comedy production, I examine concurrences and discrepancies in a comparison of the intended functions of the laugh track and the ways in which it has been perceived by "viewers at home." (Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore, "Laughing Together?," 24)

Here, examining the kinds of effects that particular laugh tracks may have on audiences,[43] TV and media theorist Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore focuses on certain instances of a designed purpose for and actual reception of a laugh track. In part, she foregrounds her research in the creative decisions or intentions of an industry practice. That is, given the industry research metric guided conceptualization of a TV program's target-audience, what was meant for the particular

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[42] I borrow this title from Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore's "Laughing Together?"
[43] With her focus groups in Britain and Norway.

use of a laugh track? Beyond industry goals, Kalviknes Bore situates her research within the broader discussion of Television's capacity for creating a sense of *liveness*.[44]

> Within the context of this wider critical debate [technological immediacy of Television and authentic portrayal of reality], the continued use of the laugh track in recorded TV comedy can be seen as an attempt to maintain a sense of liveness in prerecorded comedy in order both to "borrow" some of the cultural prestige associated with live television and to retain the sense of communal laughter traditionally associated with popular comedy. (ILKB, 25)

In line with the previous statement by Peter Kunze, the laugh track is conceived and analyzed solely as a device with respect to the comedic and its reception. It is under examination as a mechanical device that has a specific or "intended" role for mediating between industry and audience. In a section of her essay *Laughing Together* entitled "Theorizing the Laugh Track," Kalviknes Bore further specifies the nature of this role:

> The laugh track can be seen to have two key functions. One of these is to offer individual viewers a sense that "we" are all watching and laughing at the program together, as a collective audience. As Medhurst and Tuck write about the sitcom, it "invites the viewer to feel at one with the few dozen people s/he can hear laughing, and by extension with millions of others across the country"[45] (45). A

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[44] Moreover, in the above quoted pithy statement Kalviknes Bore makes clear, given much of the literature on the laugh track whether in the domain of TV and Media Studies which is inclusive of Comedy Studies, that her investigation is a response to what literature there actually is on the laugh track.

[45] "Invites" is certainly less authoritarian sounding than what the *Bloomsbury Dictionary* represents of the laugh track.

second, related function of the laugh track is to ensure that the comedy feels like a

"safe" space where it is okay to laugh at people's misfortunes or transgressions

(Neale and Krutnik 69)." (ILKB, 24)

It is of no interest of mine to wade into the discussion over the laugh track's being collectively

perceived or received, if laugh tracks have affect or not and, if so, how on whatever region of

audience. Rather, I wish to point out that buried within the main objective of Kalviknes Bore's

particular audience-reception study is the common but rather critical move to appoint the laugh

track as neutral appearing (technological) "device." It is thus presumed to be operative for a

communicative comedic process that conveys "intent" for the broadcast experience. Put another

way, her analysis, though designed to question whether or not laugh tracks are effective, relies on

a certain prejudice within media studies. It institutes comedic content as being conjoined with

technology that, by all existing literature, it would appear, is simply to be thought in terms of

being a mediating function. In the next chapter I will attempt to identify some of the key

conceptual movements within the theorizing of communication that re-enforce this dominant

orientation in the discourse. At any rate, for now at least, we see the laugh track is simply

thought formulaically. It is just another instance of a mediating component mythically bridging

the eternal universal communicative divide between sender and receiver or source-of-word

meant for an intended listener. In this manner, studies on the laugh track are set within and

shaped by a notion of "the technological" as locale for a kind of lexical resource (the common

expressions: device, effects, function). It is host that systematically signals the *systematicity* of

mediatic relations and actions. We hereby assume the laugh track – neutral in kind but readily

ascribable as particular function – to be a "device." It thus gives the theorist leverage, even

poignancy, for explaining conditions, formations as well as the transformations that occur within

what has been generalized as the current identifiable (and seemingly unified) social practice of

making comedy.[46] Effectively, Kalviknes Bore and her respondents have made a trope of what

is often considered as an industry cliché. Regardless, in maintaining this type of analysis, we

then foreclose on attempts to address how (the particular) contemporary "mechanisms," apart

from their particular *effect*, are constituted, that is, not as techniques or a trope[47] of technicity, but

as discrete technological formations (whatever the *technological* may indeed be). Thus,

questions arise, not so much about why the laugh track is theorized with respect to comedy[48] but

over *how it is* that the laugh track gets theorized – over what terms and concepts come to bear on

it being deemed a function readily absorbed within the comedic. Beyond questioning Kalviknes

Bore and the theoretical backdrop for the studying of the laugh track, we are thus prompted to

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[46] Sounds that were once (considered) an inextricable part (as regional signifier) of what might
be called physical comedy/humor are, at least within the tele-technology transmissions, framed
(simply accessed and categorized) as sound *effects*. Flatulent noises from whoopee cushions,
blurting kazoos, punctuating emissions such as rapid honking clown-horns and the *ba-dum-bum*
punch-line trope performed on the modern drum-kit are carry-over *effects* from a pre-digital
time. As such they are generic signifiers (isn't that what a function is and does?) of a type of
humour that in their various versions have been cached within the editor's digital sound-bank.
[47] Of course the text that follows is entirely exempt of anything resembling a trope ...
[48] The why of the theorizing may simply be because the laugh track appears, temporally
speaking, automatically and directly tied to theatrical expressions of humour as being, perhaps
poorly as is often underscored, in service of the humorous. As such a connection that may indeed
be just an innocent associative commonsensical pairing whereby the student or the scholar of
comedy instinctively takes the typical everyday notion of laughter as being a visceral expression
inextricably and inexplicably bound to what's felt to be funny. (This we understand also as
convention – not merely commonsensical as laughter can seemingly "express" other emotions
too – and that laughter historically accompanies shows that are humorous rather than dramatic).
Or perhaps thinking more psychologistically and taking a cue from Jacob Smith, the theorizing
no different from the presence of laughter on early wax cylinder recordings may be explained by
a humanizing/socializing impulse to quell a once anxious or uneasy relation with the
technological. Still whether born of convention or early 20th century technophobic anxiety the
theorizing assumes a relationship (perhaps largely one-way) between laugh track and comedy.
They appear to go hand in hand in a particular manner.

ask after the theorized communicative frameworks and the knowledge-making mechanisms from which such theorizing arises.

Chapter Two: On the *Very Idea*[49] of a Function

That *Bloomsbury*, Kalviknes Bore, and other TV and comedy theorists largely conceive of the laugh track as a function set within the broadcast experience merits clarification on a few fronts. Firstly, why does it get assumed as function? And secondly, how within particular theories on media and communication is *function* actually being conceived? In effect, to establish how the laugh track gets presupposed as analyzable from within such a perspective on cultural production, I expand the discussion to articulate some of the main authorizing mechanisms that give order to reading "the technological" as mediatically determined. Examining two prominent models of communication, I seek to identify the kinds of epistemological commitments for theorizing what gets readily deigned as device, within a "communicative act," as a function.

As we come to learn of the reason-based transmission model and of the meaning-based ritual model of communication, *function* is more than a theoretical trope designating technicity. It appears, given its particular status as a predicate of *knowledge*, to do a fair bit of heavy lifting. Still, though I argue these models re-enforce an instrumentalized notion of media formations, this business of theory is no tidy affair. Through positing a semantic base for making knowledge claims, the ritual model, as fostered within its semantic bias, serves to open onto a problematic that lends to exploring the laugh track independently of a cultural historical appropriation. Questions are thus left unanswered concerning the inexplicable remainder a discursive model excludes by its authorizing more meaningful statements. Subsequently, in the coming chapters, the discussion will turn to the possibilities for a non-semantic and materialist basis for generating a knowledge of things. Accordingly, we may take a few steps towards a non-discursive account

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[49] I am alluding to the specificity afforded an analytic with the term "very" for inaugurating Donald Davidson's famous provisional framing of conceptual schemes.

of the laugh track media formation that ultimately leads to engaging it independently of a metric predicating usefulness.

Communication Studies Grounded: Instruments of Knowledge-making for the Transmission and Ritual Theorists

Whether analyzing media in terms of a) the structure of a medium for transmission b) a particular message transmitted or c) the technical composition of transmission, it is presumed that "communication" of some form or another gets facilitated. In all, the media analyzed by media theorists, regardless of their particular approaches, are not simply media in their own right but are thought to be media of and for communicating something that has a social purpose. For instance, the laugh track is read as a narrative-authorized product and signifier with certain culturo-historical relevant investments. The laugh track theorist's examinations operate effectively but solely within the confines of purposes set[50] by the machinations of industry on-screen production and the languages of critique centred on the content and dissemination of its productions. More generally considered, the purported interaction between a broadcast and its audience is often conceived within a formalized system. It is conceived as a materio-technological passage for messages between the aforementioned two separate but mutually dependent coordinates: "sender" and "receiver." In a limited sense, the coordinates *sender* and *receiver* serves a pragmatic program of research. They provide the media theorist with a determinable process of transmission – a model for fixing or plotting out source and destination – that occur within a system/circuit. In a broader sense, sender and receiver operates as a basis for a model of communication, specifically, the transmission model of communication.

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[50] Some way or another granted in terms of a commonsense factical specificity.

Aside from a few theoretical divergences, the transmission model's sender and receiver –

so-naturalized as identifiable addresser and addressee – provide Kalviknes Bore the terms for

examining the laugh track under the umbrella of "communication." Sender and receiver permit

her, with unquestioned and anticipated regularity, to discover, observe and provide etiological

accounts of the laugh track for simulating *the live*.[51] The content (the message) and the

mechanism for the orderly delivery of such (the medium) are readily assumed as the object of

study and basis for a theory. Just as with any message, the laugh track's conveyed

sentiment/meanings, its routes of conveyance, the technological systems for its circulation, as

well as whatever may interfere with the productive functioning of a network of communication

are termed as "transmission."[52] By the transmission model laugh track theorists proceed to

abstract "the technological being" of the laugh track from its material reality. The laugh track is

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[51] Briankle Chang in his deconstruction of the presuppositions or hidden principle of current
models of communication reads the sender/receiver as subject/object formulation within an
economy of a delivery system. He argues it as being governed by an implicit regulatory function
(Chang even uses this word/language and in a parallel critical manner on p.47) for ensuring the
terms and ultimate execution of an exchange. Chang refers to this ideal that "governs all
mediations" by a fixed and determinable exchange as the *postal principle* (Chang,
Deconstructing Communication, pp. 45-49). – As an implicit rule that is a *fait accompli*.
[52] Appropriately, these elements and processes are coined under this term as its own model for
communication. The transmission model is derived from both pre and post WWII experiments in
electronics and applied engineering conducted at Bell Laboratories in the United States. Claude
Shannon's essay *A Mathematical Theory of Communication* systematically sets the primary
coordinates (sender of signal, channel over which signal is sent, receiver of sender's signal) for
explaining and describing how the content or information of our messages are transmitted over
our communication systems. Though rooted in the mathematical quantification of telephone and
radio conveyance processes, the Transmission model has long since evolved from its electronic-
centred beginnings. It has come to influence a wide range of perspectives for theorizing
communication as a cultural exchange. To these ends, surveying various theories of
communication, David Holmes, in his text *Communication Theory: Media, Technology and
Society* (2005), bluntly re-iterates the widely held assessment of the impact of Shannon's famous
paper to study of communication: "transmission views of communication ... all but saturated
communication theory for the most part of the twentieth century." (p.6)

represented by the figure of technology as go-between. Broadly speaking, technology is conceived as intermediary. *Technology* simply designates how (in whatever instance) transmissions occur. And the laugh track is subsumed under this designation. It lacks the possibility of having a history apart from being an instrument of cognition. By the transmission model, the laugh track is not considered as media unto its own and certainly is no aporia. It conveys. Even if the transmission theorist were to consider the laugh track as an aporia its being so would be parsed as a status. The laugh track would be an apophantic construct. It would be knowably insoluble. That is, regardless of the laugh track's being a perplexing system of exhaustion,[53] completing the line between sender and receiver, it would have residual exchange value.

With that said, not all accounts of communication are governed by transmission theory's indomitable positivism. In contrast to the transmission model is the ritual or, sometimes called, the interpretivist model of communication. The ritual model places media within the ongoing working or "drama" of the *social*.[54] By a ritual account, communication is immersive and emergent. Communication is a cultural activity. Going this route, our laugh track theorist would lose much of the explanatory traction they are seeking by distinguishing device from message, simulated from live, broadcaster from audience, etc. But to James Carey, the ritual theory's chief proponent, abstracting how information gets transmitted from the dynamic of human interactions

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[53] That produces already spent material.

[54] Caveat: "Neither of these counterposed views of communication necessarily denies what the other affirms. A ritual view does not exclude the processes of information transmission or attitude change. It merely contends that one cannot understand these processes aright except insofar as they are cast within an essentially ritualistic view of communication and social order." (James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, p.17).

only serves to greatly delimit our analyses. Contrasting his ritual model with the transmission model, Carey asserts:

> These contrasting views of communication also link, I believe, with contrasting views of the nature of language, thought, and symbolism. The transmission view of communication leads to an emphasis on language as an instrument of practical action and discursive reasoning, of thought as essentially conceptual and individual or reflective, and of symbolism as being pre-eminently analytic. A ritual view of communication, on the other hand, sees language as an instrument of dramatic action, of thought as essentially situational and social, and symbolism as fundamentally fiduciary." (James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, footnote 4, 27-28)

One way the divide between the two models[55] may be understood is by how language is deployed as an instrument. Though an instrument for both models, *language* is productive of the kind(s) of knowledge we have of our community/world/reality in distinctly different ways. Specifically, for the transmission theorist, language is the message quanta or material that gets sent. For the ritual theorist, language serves to carry and develop more rules. Still, for either theory, language is conceived of in terms of having communicative value. It circulates within the frame of each of its models for making determinable and/or readable activities that may be deemed communicative. In the coming chapter, we will examine how contemporary materialists approach media as non-human-centred phenomena. Though providing an alternative to

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[55] One that is extended through their alignment with other perhaps more established disciplines in the Humanities (presumably those within the domains of Linguistics, Philosophy, Psychology).

transmission and ritual theories, contemporary materialism is not then offered to guarantee experiencing the laugh track as a purified non-linguistic formation. Rather, the contemporary materialist's move away from a human-centric system helps to suspend the apophantic constraints that have thus far limited our examination of the laugh track. Their questions regarding the indeterminacy of things, media and our relation to them expands approaching the laugh track as extra-discursive material registry.

The Function of Function

Of the two theories of communication, the transmission model appears to provide the terms and objectives in which the laugh track is primarily identified as a function. In effect, the coordinates sender and receiver pre-determine the laugh track as "the technological." As argued in the last chapter, there is more to the claim that the laugh track is a function than registering it a trope of technicity. That is, the term "function," though appearing as an over-used placeholder for a complex of operations, is not an innocent short-hand expression. It inscribes causal authority to describing communication as a standard system of conveyance. Thus, when labelled a device or a function the laugh track is actually sanctioned as an operative within a finite set of links connecting broadcaster with audience. Questions arise for our orthodox laugh track theorist: Is it the laugh track that affects audiences? Or rather, is it conceptual force of *function* that affects things?

In *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, James Carey, critiquing the role that "function" has for the transmission theorist, makes clear its potency. He identifies function

as being a critical expression that lends palpability to the transmission theorist's formula of verifiable procedures and outcomes. Against this mechanistic formulation of cultural exchange Carey argues,

> This projection of community ideals and their embodiment in material form — dance, plays, architecture, news stories, strings of speech — creates an artificial though nonetheless real symbolic order that operates to provide not information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process. (JC, 15)

From the perspective of a brute conveyance of information, "function" operates within the communicative sign-chain between sender/receiver, machine/product, cause/effect. Functions appear as empirically observable elements (be it a device, a process) that, much like a key being turned in an ignition, triggers, given the desired effect of a medium, an intended transfer and/or possible transformation. Carey continues,

> If one examines a newspaper under a transmission view of communication, one sees the medium as an instrument for disseminating news and knowledge, sometimes *divertissement*, in larger and larger packages over greater distances. Questions arise as to the effects of this on audiences: news as enlightening or obscuring reality, as changing or hardening attitudes, as breeding credibility or doubt. Questions also are raised concerning the functions of news and the newspaper: Does it maintain the integration of society or its maladaptation? Does it function or misfunction to maintain stability or promote the instability of

personalities? Some such mechanical analysis normally accompanies a

"transmission" argument. (JC, 16)

Carey argues that "function" and "effect" impart an imaginary source and start-point lurking

behind what apparently gets communicated. Function thus ensures that the transmission

theorist's observations operate by a pseudo-scientific explanatory sequence. Apart from the

rhetorical impact that may buffer the transmission theorists' account of transmission from

challenge, invoking function signifies specific work has been done. Accordingly, we grasp how

for Kalviknes Bore, the laugh track as function is much more than a trope of language. It is the

truth of a medium or system's relay. Thus, in attributing "function-hood" to the laugh track, she

can simply focus on the necessity of its presence as the simulated immediacy of a response. That

is, on how to measure and explain the laugh track's constituting and influencing the at-home

audience's experience.[56] Ultimately, all gets tied up rather neatly. A medium's message gains

passage (hopefully pure and uncorrupted) into its desired absorption. With the sender's supposed

intended meaning intact 'the essence of a proposition' achieves its purpose. Standard observable

changes will then take place. From this perspective, we then never need to attend to how the

laugh track may be constituted. All that is important is that, like any other means to an end, it

constitutes a particular experience.

In contrast to transmission theory, for the ritual theorist, a message's primary meaning is

not the object of a broadcast transmission. Rather, messages are a mode of presentation. They

provide us with meaningful insight into the kinds of communal bonds or relationships that have

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[56] As what is at stake for theorists is the work done by the laugh track's particular kind of
mediacy.

evolved through shared values and beliefs. By this model, a newspaper media outlet and its

average reader do not constitute a hard symmetry of source and destination. In fact, their

entwined engagement in the world undermines the need for a rationalist communicative nexus.[57]

Effectively, function loses its significance and potency as a causal node. It is not representative

of a system's springboard, pivot point or spark that directly leads to a consummation of intended

outcomes. Function has no primary generative status. Rather, if anything, for the ritual theorist,

function is a heuristic designate of the roles that certain actions may have within the makings of

social presentation.[58]

Carey shows how *function,* among other terms, keeps the transmission theorist's analytic

securely abstracted from history and tradition. Applying his criticism to prevailing approaches to

the laugh track, we see that as a medium it has been theoretically pre-mediated. With that said,

there may be just a many questions as to whether Carey's account actually gets us any closer to

exploring the laugh track by its particular technological formation and as one that is without

purpose.

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[57] Within an under-delineated basis for interaction there is no need for bridging two aligned or same-configured poles by some medium, or another. In essence, Carey has thus diluted and/or de-universalized the sender/receiver staged dialectic of equivalency.

[58] Still, the relationship between sender/broadcaster and receiver/community is never entirely dissolved (i.e., that which is "the news" and its readers). Rather, each is a co-participant whose status in the interaction is just never entirely certain. Carey replaces the productive mechanics of an instrumental/rationalist view of modern communication systems with an account of communication (through media systems or otherwise) as being an always forming constitutive process. The sovereignty of "the" process of transmission and reception, though over-thrown, is subjugated. It is but another element amongst elements performing its mediatic operations within the communal drama. A news outlet, for instance, is not just a function for triggering results within the determinations of an act of transmission. Moreso, it has function and/or purpose that serve the ongoing broader makings of our social (whatever that narrative fiction may be).

Meaning's Implicit Other(s)

In his analysis of the transmission model, Carey targets the explanatory force that notions of "effect" and "function" lend to actually securing the reception of a transmitted message. He debunks the often unquestioned idealized relation between sender and receiver. At issue is the assumption that, whatever the medium for conveyance, a transmission system achieves the goal of its alleged design. In fact, it is here, apart from terminological violence, that Carey considers the transmission model as most suspect. For even in failure, seemingly poor or faulty transmission, the message sent has (registerable, measurable) effect. Simply put, one way or the other, the transmission theorist imposes a relation that is productive. The transmission model appears rigged to read our relations to communication systems as inherently positivist (there is always an outcome that is in service of the design of the relation). Instead, rejecting transmission theory's unbounded positivism, Carey makes a point of re-designating "function." It is no longer an etiological term, a trigger mechanism within a transmission. He recasts it as an expression highlighting the contingent purpose or role, within the practices of and for whatever communal network, a particular statement, act or approach may have. Ultimately, within the broader discipline of communication, *this* represents a shift away from rationalist and *a*contingent formulae to theorizing communication (and its mediations) by a social coherentism and historical contingency. More to my interests, we dispense with thinking the laugh track by the epistemological requirement that assigns "the technological" a generic designate within a broader framework for mediations. Alternatively, by Carey's approach, theorists like Kalviknes Bore and Mills could then look to engage the laugh track within the transforming play of emerging informational processes. However, I contend that the laugh track, though losing its status as device, would still just be explored as a construct both supporting and supported by a

broader system. In essence, the laugh track's potential as *its own* media formation would only be readable by a social and/or communicative purpose.

Ultimately, Carey's thinking is plagued by the same explanatory goal of the transmission theorist that seeks to make purpose of all things for which its system seeks to account.[59] Though Carey's constitutive model marks a shift in approach away from assuming a fixed cognitively ordered relationship between *subject* and *object*, his analytic 'opens the door' to having to grapple with, albeit as a linguist construct, the conditions of knowledge. The *linguistic*, though a counter to rationalism – which historicizes its form of reasoning as presupposing tradition, habit and practice, *in order to be rational* – must presuppose its own opposite. Meaning forms at the expense of the non-linguistic, non-symbolic, pre-conceptual and "specifically" (or maybe nebulously) that which might not have sense. However, Carey's analysis falls shy of contending with this implicit opposition, not to mention the "conditions" (please pardon the latent Kantianism but) from which it may potentially be formed. Instead, he turns knowledge into a human-centric productive game solely made of the terms or symbols by which we give meaning to things. Of course, this still limits experiencing the laugh track within yet another instrumental type of discourse on communication. Thus, we then merely replace Descartes with Kant.

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[59] Ironically, his cosmos of meaning and purposiveness, or form of positivism, may also signal its potential *demise*. If anything, Carey gets us to change the conversation from instrumental characterizations of our communicative practices (*vis a vis* function and effect) to the broader economy of forces permitting our meaning-making.

Chapter Three: Materialist Shenanigans at the Limits of Human Knowledge

For James Carey and other communication theorists, our communications occur within an anthropocentric milieu and are mainly conveyed by a linguistic medium. Within this milieu and medium, the content of communication is meaningful because, as recognizable products of convention or tradition, it is reproducible. Thus, in order for there to be meaning, Carey inadvertently, points to limits on the conditions for there to be meaning and knowledge. He has implicitly articulated that there is a non-meaningful other from which the meaningful is distinguished. Carey does not examine this realm of non-knowledge, nor how it may be experienced. Instead, he confines his theory to what is knowable within the supposed coherency of social practice. However, the prospect of an indeterminate under-side to meaning and knowledge opens onto questions of considerable value to my exploration of the laugh track. Specifically questions around how to contend with what is presumed *un*relatable and cannot be reproduced. Accordingly, we will now examine approaches for problematizing and countering the presuppositions of theoretical certainty concerning our mediations. For this I explore recent materialist based approaches to knowledge production.[60]

Within contemporary movements of materialism we encounter, whether in terms of applied media or aesthetic based theories, approaches that circumvent object determined subject-centred accounts for the experiencing of things. Such approaches hold considerable promise for exploring the laugh track as *its own* media formation. Recent incarnations of materialist studies, such as Marcel O'Gorman's applied media theory, approach knowledge as if it were an activity

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[60] Effectively, we are pushed towards more traditional philosophical sounding questions for establishing the conditions for knowledge, or underpinnings of reason, and for formulating the epistemological ground of certainty that makes true or false our observations.

or a thing "in the making." For one, contemporary materialists reject the fixity of rationalist epistemology. Rather, knowledge is like an adapting organism within the world. It is continually being formed and transformed through how things may come to show themselves. In effect, a knowledge's future trajectory is never determined. For another, contemporary materialists resist acquisitive or capture criteria set by rationalist apophantic principles. *Things* are to be encountered unto themselves, within their own possible domain(s) and potential for change. Simply put, *things* are not objects of knowledge or objects of a system of identifiability. The materialist thus jostles our thinking about the world from a discursive framework over to one in which we are prompted to find new ways to engage with extra-discursive phenomena.

For my purposes, recent developments in materialism represent a sustained challenge to the human-centric philosophical orthodoxy that supports both the transmission and ritual theories of communication. Accordingly, we may re-orient the discussion. We now move from the discursive framework for rationalizing media within a broader system of knowledge production to modes of engagement that, altogether, decentralize knowledge-making. A path is cleared for exploring other approaches to "things" of the world, which includes media and technology, as potentially being generative of the so-called conditions for knowledge. This path-clearing, in turn, stages the coming analyses of the laugh track. In Part Two I approach the laugh track somewhat guided by the research methodology of current media archaeologists. It is by this method of description that we may begin to explore the particulars of the laugh track as a contemporary archival formation. And one that is a dynamic and variable inventive process. We thereby depart from the general mindset of reading "technology" as tool serving cultural purposes. Instead, the technology particular to a media formation is generative of more or other

media formations. By this approach we may thus encounter the materio-mechanical order of things, specifically the laugh track, just as Agamben accounts for *the gesture*.

Questions of Materiality and the Non-linguistic

Some recent materialist approaches to media provide an alternative to a human-centred rationalist basis for our epistemologies. Against the traditional frame for analyzing media, the materialist gets us to consider that our knowledge of objects, technology, etc. emerge from the very worlds of those formations. The often-thought material counterpart to linguistic-biased meaning-making systems is what actually *is* generative of these systems. Our focus thus shifts from universal frameworks for understanding media to a detailed engagement with the particulars of the media objects at play. Accordingly, the laugh track is not just a product of a larger mediating apparatus that does its part to carry forward a network of cultural interest. Rather, we may approach the laugh track media object as its own system. Wherein, it in fact may diverge from mediative work. To be sure, by this engagement, the laugh track formation is not just a media object. Alternatively, the knowledge we can actually have of the laugh track may hold the form of what cannot be known and is ultimately of no use. For all intents and purposes, what is at stake, then, is the nature of knowledge production. This opens onto a larger problematic that circumscribes the coming discussion in Part Three on the limitations of media archaeology. For if we are to engage the laugh track in some sense that remains true to Agamben's gesture as pure means, we will have to push past the media archaeologist's pre-requisite of archival presence. This, as I argue, restricts the laugh track's being engaged by it

ongoing quantificatory metrics. Effectively, at issue will be how generativity and uselessness may co-habit.

At any rate, new approaches to materialism revive the traditionally rejected inanimate dumb/dead matter of experience. Objects of the world that were simply thought of as holding particular roles and places within the structural and spatial orderings (categories) of the *cogito* are held to be imbued with their own, inexplicable but relatable, being. For thing theorists, applied media theorists, and those in the business of aestheticizing materiality and technology, objects appear to have a life or their own. Against a reduction to our everyday utilitarian interests thing theorists conceive and put into practice a non-human-centric methodology. In their estimation, objects and technology produce knowledge. Alternatively, thing theorists embrace the non-mental *inanimate* for its not being reducible to any logic of form, measure and purpose. In this respect, the furnishings, fixtures and chattels of our physical world are "things" that possess their own integrity. Consistent with their counter to an anthropocentric use-based hypothesis these types of thing theorists also reject Cartesian representational realism, where objects of experience give rise to transparent "facts." This is the kind of realist that believes there is a 1:1 correspondence between mind and reality, and that the full veracity of an object comes to light, most objectively by human cognition, wherein the true presence of things and human cognition share the same plane of reality. Against this thinking, thing theorists tell us that our experience of the material world circumvents any premise of equivalency between subject and object. Though our interrogations of our mental capacities may arguably be solid, grounds for asserting a representationalist relationship are specious. Things are always changing and in turn are generative of other things, as well as, other possible changes. Thus, our experience of things can never entirely be clear nor can it be certain. Conversely, we need re-cognize in objects

and our relation to them an impenetrable opacity. In short, thing theorists believe our accounts and itemizations need to be attuned to the external-to-cognition flow of things. So rather than abstracting from the world, they thereby propose approaches that permit us to more directly experience things as dynamic, unpredictable and generative.

Though not committed to the thing theorist's generalized account of knowledge production, it is towards this kind of "autonomous" generativity that I am seeking to re-position the discussion of the laugh track. As stated, I wish to explore the laugh track as a formation that diverges from mediative work. On the face of things, broadcast laugh-producing systems are the opposite of dynamic and unpredictable. They are mechanical formations that reduce and distill recorded visceral (mostly human) effusions to quantifiably regulable mediations. However, by following the contemporary materialist's thinking that things emerge and transform independently of our knowledge, we may resist subjugating the technological to being a means to an end. Instead of the laugh track being limited to a system for quantifying laughter we may alternatively explore how it transforms and extends its kind of media formation.

In recent developments of thing theory certain researchers, working within media studies, have been exploring technology in ways that break from a communicative use-based ethos. They want to explore technology as if it were an under-defined "agent" provoking possibilities for aesthetic and philosophical change. Applied Media Theorist Marcel O'Gorman writes:

> The goal of Applied Media Theory is not, as in Harman's case, to demonstrate
> that anything – from a clod of clay to a child's toy – can bring the world into
> being. Still, AMT does promote speculative contemplation about the lifeworld of

physical objects. More importantly, this method serves as a methodology for tearing technological tools from their instrumental context, so that they may serve as objects of contemplation rather than distraction, even before they break down. Without wading too deeply into a Heideggerian morass, we might say that Applied Media Theory serves as a vehicle for provoking an experience of technological objects as present-at-hand to one in which they are ready-to-hand." (Marcel O'Gorman, "Broken Tools and Misfit Toys: Adventures in Applied Media Theory," 39-40)

O'Gorman is proposing a perceptual shift. *Things*, or here, tools, emerge in an ambiguous field of relations. To reiterate the preceding overview, things are not contingent upon observation or being objects of consciousness. Rather, it is within this play of relations that our thinking about the material world gets activated. Alternatively, the world of which we are a part is then to be experienced as generative of the possibilities for our engagement and knowledge. Put another way, technology is not simply restricted to its seemingly designed purposes. Instead, its particular designs represent a potential opening onto unexpected engagements in the world (that diverge from the regulated and instrumentalist conception of machines, computers, etc). Accordingly, our tools have the unique privilege of creating non-human-centred knowledge formations. Proposing an interaction based approach O'Gorman theorizes,

An "epistemology engine" is a technology or a set of technologies that through use frequently become explicit models for describing how knowledge is produced. The most dramatic examples of "epistemology engines" influence our notions of subjectivity, directly affecting how we understand what it means to be

human and to perceive things from a human perspective. They enable us to draw connections between the knowledge producing capacity of the human mind and technologies that putatively function according to similar mechanical processes. The philosophy of mind is replete with theorists modeling the brain, which even today is poorly understood, on technologies whose design is better understood. An epistemology engine is thus a special case of a more general phenomenological notion that entails the ways in which life-world practices form the basis for what often become scientific theories. But it is also a case in which the practices are engaged with technologies, which in turn, suggest what can be models for knowledge." (MO, 362)

The very coordinates for our appropriation of things are *in* and *of* things. The applied media theorist thus attempts to tap into the pre-conceptual feedback loop set within an inexhaustible and seemingly primary *being in the world*. That is, by a more classical formulation, "the *in-itself*" represents the materials from which our ordering mechanisms are derived.

Though I find questionable O'Gorman's notion that things, media, tools, etc. engineer their epistemic order, I can, however, get behind the applied media theorist's more general idea that things are generative of the processes for how they emerge. Accordingly, the laugh track – which I dare say produces knowledge or a like outcome governed by any such disciplinal orientation or regimen – generates more of itself. But, as I have outlined earlier, this is an aporia. The laugh track undermines its mediative productivity actually by maintaining its system as a media formation. That aside, for now, I take the point that O'Gorman's main objective here is to resist abstract formulations that prioritize and make faculty of a system that produces knowledge.

Instead our *knowledges* may be thought as always coming into presence, a becoming as it were, that are generated by the indeterminate and always changing interplay of mechanisms. Where the transmission or even the ritual theorist stops**,** the applied media theorist begins. They investigate how the conditions for our representations permit other possibilities of engagement that support a thinking that is independent of our predictive and instrumentalist conceptual schemes.

Matter exceeding the *itself* of Thingness

Applied media and thing theorists prompt divergent engagements and critical reflection on the nature and formation of both human experience and knowledge of the physical world. I consider this helpful for engaging media, the laugh track in particular, outside the constraints of pre-ordained discursive methods underwritten by the means/end formula of traditional communication theory. However, their account of "things," though refocussing attention on an object's being generative, may suffer from similar epistemological pitfalls as a rationalist and utility biased thesis. In other words, their formulation for discreteness may be too generic and collapses *thingness* into a readily knowable productive entity.

In her book *Stuff Theory*, Maurizia Boscagli radicalizes the materialist premise by which thing theorists claim the potential for a productive relationship emanating from the discrete operations of matter, of machine, of bodies, of objects. Specifically, Boscagli challenges characterizing *things* as tidy identifiable knowably unknowable "discrete" entities. Moreover, she contests the discreteness (a specifying characterization of discreteness) of "things" over their being formulated as *self*-contained. By her thinking, we are in no position to assert a thing's supposed limits or factical quantificatory qualities as either being arbitrary or having universalizable characteristics that then make it a discernible entity. I consider this problematic

concerning how *the particular* diverges from *the universal* to be critical for my analysis of the

laugh track. Its discreteness cannot just be assumed. It is not simply in virtue of, for instance,

"being its own media formation." To explore the laugh track as a peculiar formation we not only

need to identify how it is peculiar but, more importantly, to do so in a way that does not subsume

it within a generic model of differentiation.

Countering some of the thinking informing *thing theory*, Boscagli expands contemporary

materialism by situating it within the capitalist system of daily mass production. It is a global

system, as she argues, wherein objects of consumption – products – by design undergo constant

transformation (i.e. of worth, relevant application to whatever system, a shelf-life determining

usefulness). The discernibility of a thing's qualities is thus tied to fluctuating everyday cultural

notions.[61] We do not experience things in the plenitude and certitude of their isolable thingness,

we experience *stuff*.[62] Boscagli writes,

> This is a materiality that refuses to behave according to the rules of the "order of
>
> things" of modernity. Uncontainable by the *tabula* through which, as Michel
>
> Foucault describes it in *The Order of Things*, matter is made into epistemological
>
> fields and taxonomies of knowledge, stuff designates those forms of hybrid
>
> materiality that defeat, with their plasticity and unceasing traffic with the human,
>
> the long western history of systemization of the object. Under the terms of the
>
> new materialism, such potential for uncontainability should be discernible in any
>
> material object. In the lived conditions of the real world, however, some objects

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[61] Put more brutishly, our relation to things is awash in seemingly unbridled consumer
capitalism.

[62] The word "stuff" indicates a reference to a lesser discernible, ambiguous or unquantified
specificity or indeterminacy as to a things use or being useless. In effect, what takes hold of our
perception of a thing's attributes and qualities is a fluid sentimental relation or feelings of such
and such towards things entrenched in practice.

are more amenable to plasticity than others ... Stuff refers to those objects that have enjoyed their moment of consumer allure, but have now shed their commodity glamour – without being quite cast aside. ... Not particularly useful but not useless to cast off." (Maurizia Boscagli, *Stuff theory: everyday objects, radical materialism*, 5-6)

Having situated *things* or objects in the unruly transitory play of contemporary commerce, Boscagli asks: what is so definite and clear in the new materialist's perception of *things* when a thing's potential and gathering of distinguishing attributes is ambiguous? How could the thing theorist be so certain? What might be their alternative grounds for certainty? To her, as to what an object's discreteness consists is, to be declared with a modicum of certainty, indeterminate. Within a consumerist world, objects are typically experienced with fading feelings of potency and a sense of vagueness that surrounds their relevance and purpose. Apart from decommissioning a use/useless metric, Boscagli emphasizes that stuff has an affective historical dimension. Our things entail personal attachments. We have varying emotional commitments with and towards (a system of) pre-ordained itemizable products. The things we purchase are not just inanimate lumps of product readied for bulk consumption. Ultimately her point, as in the passage above, is to expose the new materialist's claim about things having a potential for uncontainablity as being ahistorical and devoid of context. It is really an entirely unempirical unfounded assertion. Conversely, for Boscagli the terms of a thing's discreteness, or, its "potential for uncontainability" are never readily discernible. Thereby, we have no right to assume there to be independent, isolable qualities natural or core to a singular or individuated (from the presupposed dividual) unit. What is then considered as potentially productive, in contemporary theories of the *thing*, is not in or emergent from the thing. Instead, the notion of

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uncontainability only reinforces a system for inferring transparent and pure qualities against or

relative to an assumed backdrop of *indiscrete amorphous* conditions. I take the general point of

Boscalgi's critique to represent an important cautionary tale. We can neither presume things to

have true properties nor characteristics of the supposed realm[63] in which they emerge. By

extension, when researching the laugh track, we need be mindful of generic relational

formulations of how things are discrete. Formulations, we may suspect, that assume a productive

relationship pre-ceded our exploration. Given that I have set out to explore uselessness as

potentially non-binaric this concern is especially pertinent. The very method for identifying the

laugh track system's uselessness may impart a usefulness to the particulars that constitute the

laugh track. The useful would then produce the useless. Of course, this is the functionalist

parsing system I seek to elude. In this respect, we may never actually gain entry to the

unadulterated realm of pure means to which Agamben's notion of gesture gestures.

Boscagli challenges the new materialist's account of *things* at the heart of its theoretical

productiveness.[64] She points out that how things are described as discrete entities permit a

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[63] Perhaps as a non-productive surround with an entirely nebulous opacity.

[64] Apart from theoretically, she initiates an intimate style of research. Contrary to new
materialist's, Boscalgi's approach is one of exploring the inherent and seemingly inescapable
investments we have in things, with *our* things. She opts for exploration of a full sensorial
bonding that, prior to the New Materialist's theorized primary relation to things *as* things,
invariably makes possessions of the "furniture of the world." Opposing the cool detachment of
the contemporary social scientist, Boscagli writes,

> "these science-oriented discourses [new materialism], considering matter as such,
> engage less and less with the fact that this volatile materiality takes shape and gets
> assembled and disassembled in the only possible cultural-economic context: that
> of modern capital. The techno-scientific ontology of the hybrid object, its
> ecology, is always already a part of a political economy. Culture asks us to look
> again at the messiness of matter. This matter is not simply technonature, but
> technoaesthetics. By technoaesthetics is meant, first, that aesthetics is an
> important technology of matter, a *dispositif* through which materiality comes into

theorist to erect the concept of things as unquantifiable. In effect, she attacks at the point where

this new regime of thinker overthrows the old subject-object dualism and thereby re-sets our

epistemological base as *object*-governed. Instead, as Boscagli brings focus, the notion that a

thing's potential for *un*containment – its indeterminacy as to having a definable status within or

by any categorization of objects – is a theoretically (prescriptively) determined construct of

empiricism. Once again, as with the transmission theorist's accounting for media, the spectre of

pre-mediating terms appears. Likewise, the thing theorist's notion of a thing only gets traction

when abstracted from the very play of forces that make things a transforming site of investments

and negotiations. Following this approach only gives the laugh track a new identity or role

according to a category of abstracted role-ness. Conversely, Boscagli, through tripping up the

detached methodological stance of new materialism as one of attachments and trappings (in the

always altering exchanges of our *everyday*), radicalizes the *thing*'s unquantifiability. It is not due

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being; second, that the new forms of matter are also aesthetic, that is, that they
have been shaped by artistic production; third, that materialities have been
accessed primarily through the senses, apprehended synaesthetically, affectively
and somatically through a perceptive apparatus that dismisses any hierarchical
separation between soma and matter. The commodified and aesthetic version of
materiality takes us into the middle of the everyday, and allows the critic to gauge
with more clarity the effects of matter as a force operating through different
network flows of power – economic, technological, scientific, libidinal, affective,
collective, and individual. I call this everyday matter with style, accessible to the
subject's senses and produced also by aesthetic practice, stuff."(MB, 4)

From this passage, we gather that materialism for Boscagli is more complex than the purified
matters of empiricist observation. "Things," through seemingly incessant shaping, mouldings
and re-configuring of our world, possess an irreducible density of affects. What materializes is a
part of a larger makerly or aesthetic(izing) process (which is not the same as the fetishized
object). For better or for worse, the machinery of consumer capitalism imbues our so-called
things and everyday objects (Goods or products as opposed to the designated "collectible" that in
so many instance have well exceeded their ...) with use value which generates inescapable links
of personal attachment.

to a specifiable potential of un-containment. Rather, what may be identified as being a thing's "potential" is both historically variable and, more poignantly, possibly *impotent*. This is a possibility I will, in Part Three, give considerable play to in examining the notion of *dynamic* that greatly informs Wolfgang Ernst's media archaeology. It appears Ernst has no room for considering media that lack transformative thrust. Instead, I take up the dud, impotent and unquantifiable as a way to explore the very machine constitution of the laugh track. At any rate, for Boscagli, a thing when experienced as stuff, as thing within *its* context of practices and productions, eludes determination and thereby falters at the calculus of discreteness. *Stuff* is, if anything, then an expenditure of a system of expenditures. Its discreteness problematizes an accounting for *"..."* as a specifiable potency.[65]

Success/Failure Metric Problematized (of what's not simply stuff but lovely digital garbage)

Boscagli is valuable for cleansing the thing theorist's notions of restrictive and contradictory commitments. Things are never just pre-ordained as or limited to being things. If that were so, matter would be abstracted from the very dynamic flux of the world around which the new materialist's situate their analysis. Boscagli's point that a thing's being discrete is never determinate in turn raises questions about things having predictive and quantificatory attributes. In this sense, Boscagli's discipline-specific challenge greatly resonates with the general manner in which I will later explore the regulatory mechanisms of the laugh track. Accordingly, we will need to look past the defining features of machines as computational systems toward how they may break with being a quantificatory regime.

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[65] Instead, we tend toward the clarification of the amorphous that gives little access to what might indeed be discrete.

In some respects the destination to which Boscagli's theory of *stuff* leads is the realm of analysis that *failure* theorist Eldritch Priest and *glitch* practitioner Kim Cascone focus on. While she attends to the unquantifiable terms and limits of a thing's discreteness they make game of the unprogrammed breaches inherent to a computer system's quantificatory prowess and generativity within the context of the contemporary arts. Boscagli challenges where the limits are while Priest and Cascone engage un-controlled deviant elements within the perceived limits of a system. Along with Boscagli, their analysis has some affinity with the general way I have conceived of the laugh track as uselessness in reserve. In learning from their experimentation, I gain insight into examining the laugh track not only for its potency in generating more archival systems but for doing so as a result of an inherent impotency.

Instead of *uselessness*, Priest and Cascone explore *failure*. They do so in a way that demonstrates so-called flaws and errors as unavoidable to the generative plan for successful outcomes. From the programmer's trashcan of computer algorithms, they repurpose the aborted materials of a program's incalculable and unpredictable failings, its "glitches." As has become a commonplace term in our contemporary lexicon, "glitch" refers to a brief malfunctioning or irregular fault within a digital system. The appropriation of g*litches* has its beginnings in certain 20th century artistic practices that make product of "the mistake" or "the accident." Here, Priest outlines the failure/success inversion or an *aesthetic(S) of failure*:

> The discrete event of the glitch as a break in an artefact's practicable relays
>
> becomes a continuous event when the evaluation of its occasion is caught up in its
>
> own duration, in its temporization. A point of fault becomes a fault-line when its
>
> evaluation is prolonged, for the process of assessment, in effect, suffers a hitch

serially and ongoingly such that it cannot help but accumulate expressive

correspondences that intensify the abstract potential of the "error" by giving the

derivative meanings that cling to its barb the chance to tell another story. (Eldritch

Priest, *Boring, Formless, Nonsense*, 7-8)

Making "the glitch" into a musical form, Priest's co-conspirator Kim Cascone[66] seeks to

reposition composers and musical compositions with respect to the unconscious, non-predictive

conceptualized workings of computational technologies. His kind of sonic experimentation

pushes for an aesthetics comprised of, for example, broken time and broken measure that shows

through irregularity and unplanned randomness. In effect, experimentation that derails orthodox

ideals organized by a sense/prejudice of symmetry and completeness. The idea is to break away

from systems bound by conventional categorizations of music production and their attendant

knowledge for, or in service of, further production. Instead, the hope is to re-conceive our

thinking on *the composition* as holding the potential for always expanding the modalities of our

musical practices. Still, it is *within* this time-honoured paradigm of control and mastery that his

exploration of the unavoidable digital fissures, fractures and fragments – that the flawless

performance and hyper-programmed music score masks – becomes potent. As overall, the

aesthetics of failure represents an ongoing project of devising techniques that systematically

undo artistic mastery. Here, on two fronts, the failure theorist's experimentation runs parallel

with how I explore the laugh track. We both examine the quantificatory mechanisms that secure

a system's goal in terms of what eludes quantifying. Further, we conceive of inventive processes

as possibly leading nowhere or for somehow subverting a system ideal of having infallible logic.

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[66] For some years Cascone has devoted his efforts towards this through the formation of an experimental community of digital labs.

However, while Priest and Cascone re-work corrupt/deviant quanta to fit within a functionalist program I will look to expand our notion of functioning to actually entail uselessness.

Put into action, Cascone's project involves developing new practices and strategies for divergent compositional techniques. He wants to supplant composer-driven legibility biased systems, effectively schools of composition, with databases filled with digital artefact(ing) chaos. The new source material will allow for unpredictable play with a technology's un-programmed by-products, waste or unproductive expenditure. However, all good intentions aside, and as Priest makes clear, the very processes proposed by Cascone likely work to re-inscribe the system to which the proposed experimentations pose a challenge.

> Cascone's expressions of failure – "glitches, bugs, application errors, system crashes, clipping, aliasing, distortion, quantization noise, and even the noise floor of computer sound cards" – are judgements made according to the way they skew the assumed functionality of the digitally instrumentalized artefact, a functionality that in contemporary industrial cultures revolves around expressions of speed, connectivity (to other digital technologies), and simulation. Yet these "failures" are not naked failures. They are dressed in scare-quotes, which directs judgement towards something non-functional, something that creates an irresistible alliance with a network of significations that do not necessarily interfere with the "positivist and functionalist paradigm [of] our technological society." (EP, 6)

The marginal is made relevant through the thematizing of its unsystematic irrelevance. It has status as a disturbance of or interruption to the expected execution of a command governed by system rates and performance specification. The digital fault is thus made readable as generic character (as placeholder denoting disruption) and contrapuntal resource within the margins of

the programmed. Cascone thus capitulates. Just as laugh track theorists designate canned laughter as a function in service of a broadcast, he validates the glitch, giving it place and purpose within a coherent system for engaging music. A potential failed experiment instead makes rescue of the discrete digital oddity. In the later chapters for exploring the constitution of the laugh track we return to the glitch as a disruptive digital formation that underscores the foibles of invention. We also come to question if the computational *actually* lacks the certitude Priest and Cascone's framework for failure must afford it. It is by these types of investigations that I look to push past the aforementioned media archaeologist's pre-requisite of archival presence. At any rate, the inclusion of the "marginal" may be generative of *new* approaches predicated on materials once dismissed as scraps or digital detritus but this contemporary art ethos of experimentation effectively masks inversion as perversion. Ironically, Cascone fails. He maintains the very order a practice of *failure* was meant to undermine.

Perhaps, given the implicit political ambitions of most *avant garde* movements, this integrative move is of no surprise. The "positivistic" and "functionalist paradigm"[67] that frames Cascone's collusion with standard processes of production is near impossible to resist. In effect, it is by functionalism that malfunctioning operations, dysfunctional elements, glitches etc., are

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[67] Priest's analysis of functionalism as characterizing our modern technological systems is greatly instructive. Though I examine the predilection for positing "function" as causal mechanism (etc.) with the idea of challenging its conceptual limits, Priest's analysis helps to highlight the ethos of industrialized productivity that governs our notions and wants for factory specified idealized performance. It is no doubt that within the mechanized framing and mindset of "what works," we operate by success/failure standards. As well, that we identify facts and factors that produce the results that then permit inferring something to be a function.

given compass.[68] Of course, by the dictionary definition "glitch," either as verb or noun, is conceived within the orbit of functionalism. Still, the trajectory of an aesthetics predicated on the glitch as un-programmable digital deviation holds promise for exploring the very borders of a "functionalist paradigm." This is not to propose a Hegelian re-structuration – a negation or contradictory movement within a productive apparatus. Rather, as Priest suggests, it is to engage and experiment with the logics of exclusion that discretely govern the generative processes of our technological systems. This is a significant insight for how the *failure* theorist formulates a thesis of disorder. As well, exclusionist circuitry is a point from which I will also get some purchase for analysing the kind of techno-archival regime that the laugh track is. The laugh track, I argue, perversely maintains the rules of its medium by rendering the recorded material as a tool-version of itself. It is not the means for replication. It is the by-product of repetition and quantification designed to ensure, against its own exhaustion, replication. I will return to the peculiarities of this process in Part Three.

As per the glitch, we grasp that built into the modern technological systems that give meaning, form and maintain intensity is the unplanned internal threat of an always encroaching *un*regulatable force. The erratic discrete moments within the circuitry of our productive machinery that break sequence, frame and order are not outside the system. However, a glitch's nestedness, though within workings of a system, is an unpreventable disruption. Its location, its frequency of occurrence, even its electrical frequency, cannot be isolated, programmed against nor entirely buffered from. The glitch is materially but invisibly and indivisibly a system's indeterminacy.

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[68] This is much like how the locksmith industry advances. Any breach of a security system serves to improve the industry's locking mechanisms.

Chapter Four: Objects, Storage Media and Archival Mechanisms

In the last chapter, in a turn to recent studies in materialism, the focus was on how to approach "things" given their irreducible discreteness. The general orientation of the discussion represented a counter to the orthodoxy of rationalist and semantic based accounts of knowledge for supporting theories on communication and media. The status of "things," in terms of consumer items or digital artifacts, is considered to be ambiguous. It was argued that things, in order for one to properly engage their kinds and degrees of indeterminacy, require other epistemic registries than fixed determinations for their being objects of knowledge. In this chapter, "things," beyond their own discreteness as localized objects, are explored for what they generate as and within our modern systems that organize, produce and proliferate. In effect, focusing on the generative components of such systems serves to initiate thinking through how we may conceive of the contemporary archive. Of course, I am trying to stage how we may identify the laugh track as an archive. And beyond that, a kind of archive that defies being of use and purpose. First however, I explore how various industry manufactured objects institute archival techniques and mechanisms that circulate, preserve and perpetuate contemporary networks of exchange and consumption.

Largely relying on Matthew Fuller's ecological account of objects, much like Boscagli's *stuff* and Priest's *glitch*, I gain some purchase for thinking about contemporary archival systems as auto-generative formations. Fuller is keenly aware of the generative elements of the mechanism of standardization that organize and transform the contemporary landscape of

monolithic systems (ranging from the production of goods to an array of communications to transport and invariably applicable to systems of finance and of knowledge, just to identify a few). He provides us with a rather elastic account of the general forces at play regulating, by particular configurations of objects, the modern day experience. However, though unhinged from a central or authorizing discourse, if restricted to Fuller's instructive analysis, ultimately we see the archive would amount to another mediating instrument. That is, it would be an organically derived function still governed, though obliquely, by a broader network of rules and principles. By contrast, in the next chapter, Michel Foucault will get us to consider the complexities of the archive as representative of a truly discrete historical formation. Closer to my objective for the laugh track, he prompts exploring the archive as an ongoing indeterminate formation of rules and as formative of rules that permit our doing history.

The Collected Object

> This or any other procedure is merely a dam against the spring tide of memories which surges toward any collector as he contemplates his possessions. Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories. More than that: the chance, the fate, that suffuse the past before my eyes are conspicuously present in the accustomed confusion of these books. For what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order? (Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 60)

Writing at a time of early 20th century mass production of consumer goods, Walter Benjamin explores the collecting and preservation of things. He considers it to be an archival inclination that is both institutionally systematic while being highly idiosyncratic. Certainly, our connection to what comes to be called a collectible, or more anthropologically, an artefact, is locatable in a collective space and precedent temporal order (i.e., historical timeline or by some broad narrative coordinates). However, collectibles are also infused with personal investments in the fleeting passing of real and imagined events. The structure of an event, though always destined as time-bound, is also subject to the magic and/or hidden rules of ellipsis. As Benjamin makes clear, the avid collector's passion toward whatever object bestows a sense and meaning upon a cherished possession(s) that, from the non-collectors' detached perspective, may otherwise be just another object. Thus things come to stand forth as having a pre-ordained but malleable – given the strength of one's memory and sentiment – registry of value and rank. The collected item appears to, before the gaze of the enamored collector, automatically gather or collect *itself* into an appropriately designated grouping, classification or category. No doubt Benjamin's observation anticipates Boscagli's account of *stuff*. However, for the purposes of this chapter and for staging an encounter with the pre-authorizing archivo-technological formations for the laugh track, the collected object serves as entry onto examining the technological imprints that precede our intimacies with things. As we will explore in Chapter Nine, the laugh machine's techniques of salvage and extraction, prior to any material assembly of laughter, is circumscribed by an archival authority contained within the recorded material to be assembled. For now, though, the general point is, within the "mechanical era" of mass production the mechanisms by which we gather and order, things are often regulated by pre-set dating protocols. The global features of objects (i.e. a book's formatting) along with specific paratextual framings (regardless of an

object being designated as a collectible or "run of the mill" item) derive from industry specific manufacturing standards. These aspects of goods, commodities, artefacts (whether customized or of general consumption) obviously relate the properties of the medium of production. However, they also relate inherently generalizable cataloguing principles that facilitate a particular type of (potential) future mediation between collected material and historical or archaeological rendering. This raises a key problem for exploring the laugh track: how do a system's standardized techno-mechanical traits reveal the laugh track as its own distinct transformative medium? If we are to explore the routine production of laugh track material in this way, we will then need to examine how its particular quantificatory metric deviates from established machine principle. That aside, for now we need grasp these circumscribed terms. The collected object, though it still may be experienced nostalgically (a phenomena of our era no doubt) or invested with personal (and often desultory) meanings, is ready for institutional processing within the technologically flexible formatting of the modern archive. The post-Benjaminian possession is thus pre-possessed of and by the very mechanisms of its production and productive apparatus. As mass produced object, it is "system-magically"[69] imbued with the attributes of the broader structure for its circulation that invariably contribute to further expanded circulation.

For media ecologist Matthew Fuller, who specifically analyzes the linkages of modern information networks, the very idea of an object's circulatory potential leads to curious and productive forms of feedback. To him, the attributes of objects are active as an insidious contagion. Though not expressly focused on the archive, Fuller's work, however, is instructive for bringing attention to the industrio-commercialized circulatory system of standardization governing modern day mass-produced objects. Like Benjamin, somewhat anticipating Boscagli's

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[69] My coinage.

challenge to the new materialist's abstract formulation of *things*, Fuller advances an account of *objects* as processes. The products of consumer culture are not dormant. They contribute to the circulation of a system of production. In other words, objects are active carriers of a system's potential expansion, contraction and, ultimately, its future. Accordingly, we gain some perspective on how micro-elements of a larger aggregate of interests may not only sustain but foster the interconnectedness and authority of that aggregate. This relates directly to my thinking regarding a general conception of the laugh track broadcast production. We need to approach it as a system that is formed through a process of pre-registry that inheres in the laugh track's readymade materials. Again I will return to examine the specific nature of that process in chapter nine. For now though, I maintain the focus on Fuller's description of the productive dynamics of modern objects. Fuller writes,

> What is interesting about the freight container and the technology of digital packet-switching is that they work as a metaobject. A donkey cart can be used to carry turnips or bricks; a wooden barrel can carry tar or wine; these are objects made with other elements in mind. What can be said, though, is that the container and the packet exemplify in particularly pure but different ways a trajectory toward standardization, which then compels the adoption of their standard in a way that is not complex but direct. What become standardized therefore are not simply objects, but processes. (Matthew Fuller, *Media Ecologies*: *Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture*, 95-96)

By Fuller's example of freight containers and the technology of digital packet-switching, contemporary objects, or rather metaobjects, are productive and supportive of more, and potentially other, networks of production. For Fuller, the particular entrenchment and standardization of these networks is ensured by the system-specific predictive or regulatory metrics of: classification; temporal limits on lifespan as relates to a manufactured expiry date or bounded term of obsolescence; and, the generative capacity for a system, device or component's logical extension and adaptability within a prevailing platform of operations. In effect, all these qualities that comprise objects are, by design, processes that mark off what is not part of a particular network. At the same time, these qualities underscore the terms of a particular systems' functionality or productiveness. We thus are prompted to consider the individuated act of collecting within a highly stratified and systemized set of codes for delineation and quantification. When objects are thought this way, we may surmise that the archive does not impose the terms of registry on its materials. It is only the official final destination where objects come to be known or citable as particular collected materials. Accordingly, archival structural attributes – *vis a vis* classificatory metric, temporal registry, historical fact of propriety (manufacturer, Radio Frequency Identification, chain of title) – precede the confines of the repository and comprise the make-up of objects.[70] In the next chapter we see that Foucault's

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[70] We note that for Fuller, "standardization" is a fluid process. Not only is the destiny of an object prescribed with a specifiable potential for how it is indeterminate so is the system of which it is a part. Effectively, like the productive potential of a metaobject, a system's form of standardization is itself a process, in one way or another, preparatory of subsequent standardization. Thinking out the life of modern technological systems much as if they were alive as ecological systems Fuller declares,

> Meanwhile, as particular systems become self-generating, perpetuat-
> ing themselves by virtue of the critical mass of interrelations they build up,
> other elements come into composition with them, send them on detours,
> detach themselves, fall into disuse, vanish, arise in contradistinction, or emerge

account of the archive operates by a similar distinction. The physical repository may hold

documents, records and materials. However, the system of archivation that regulates their

coming to presence (in whatever knowledge configuration) is not, as if an identifiable and

locatable epistemological order, *itself* contained. Nevertheless, even though there is a parallel

with Fuller, Foucault resists Fuller's would-be systemizing of the archive. Though he sees it as

an authorizing and regulative formation, Foucault does not conceive of the archive as a

productive network. He remains uncommitted to assigning the archive a purpose. Still, Foucault

is very committed to accounting for the archive as a discrete formation. And, in due course, it is

through Foucault's open-ended account of the archive that I explore the laugh track archival

formation as pure means.

And thus, Disco as a Reserve

The metaobject represents processes for entrenching the standards that retain and

proliferate a system's authorizing encodings as a reserve of practices and protocols. The object

of circulation is always an object of its logico-mechanical past and present possibilities that

executes its objectness by a system's pre-quantified calculations. Fuller provides a broad account

of the metaobject as mechanism of standardization within large-scale contemporary systems

designed for storage and conveyance. To restate, he articulates how the metaobject acts as carrier

> to take up the relations and forces that are now perhaps left in their wake. (MF, 98)

Modern systems operate within a greater order of standardizing generative schemes. A system's
variability, fluidity, indeterminacy, fragility, unpredictability, in effect unproductiveness, is
circumscribed within a sphere of instrumentalized reproduction.

of a systems structural attributes. In the same vein, Tan Lin accounts for disco as operating in a similar way to how Fuller describes metaobjects and systems. He provides us with a concrete instance of an archival system that falls in line with Fuller's theorizing. Here, disco is not a musical system in the typical sense. For Lin, disco is fully circumscribed by its archival traits as a modern storage medium. As a complement to Fuller's analysis of objects and systems, Lin describes the self-generating potential of digital storage media. Audio fragments, essentially the components of a track of disco music, further parsed into smaller fragments, are not just expressions of a larger system of order and construction. They become the code that serves to multiply a system's capacity to replicate itself. This, as we shall see, is particularly poignant for exploring the laugh track as a techno-mechanical archive. In going forward, it helps to grasp the significance of a key distinction. The isolable or individual laugh track is not only designed to circulate a system of archivation. It is a quantificatory mechanism designed to circulate as a system of archivation. Each laugh track is preceded by its being an archive. Its assemblage as a timed unit is permitted by a perverse archival regime of imitation. Effectively, what the laugh track generates has already been generated. It is an archivated production of a re-production that we may suspect is already archivated. We will return to this tail-chasing conundrum in Part Three.

Disco is unlike any other form of popular music, which is often evaluated according to particular conventions governing a song structure. Rather, for analyzing the popular dance music phenomenon of the 1970s, Lin conceives of disco purely as a function of 20th century digital technology. So, by the dumbness of its automaticity, disco does no more than to perform its being a technological contrivance. The depth and potency of disco is thereby to be estimated in

its being a resource platform for dance music mixes. As Lin analyzes, this reserve that houses and accesses quantified musical tropes and beats contains little more than the structural and stupefying characteristics of "an empty storage medium of history."[71] Where Fuller prompts reflecting on how objects generate modern storage systems, Lin collapses the auto-generative seesaw between object and system into one mode of reproducibility. In effect, disco is a computer "operating system." It is much like a binary-code-bounded repository that has no purpose other than (re)manufacturing a databases' housing of previously recorded musics. Lin writes,

> What does disco do? It programs a random-access search for "origins" and incites in the reader a search for sources, which turn out to be hallucinations or echoes of sources. Such a programming language was once called literature (we have chosen to call it art history), though disco, of course, is not a literature at all; it merely simulates the effects of literature (as empty brand) with the uncanny precision of our era's version of a lullaby: the remix. Disco is a programming language. It simulates the desire to remember when human remembering has become, from a technological standpoint, unnecessary or impossible. Disco thus proposes a solution to the vast volumes of distributed media (now databased on the Internet) that began in the nineteenth century and have snowballed of late – in the form of photographs, tape recordings, films, records, CDs, and hard drives ... Disco proposes a radical minimalization in the accessing of voices, regarded as discrete and modular data. For as we have seen, disco involved the systematic subtraction of extraneous information "tracks" and elevation of a percussion track

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[71] See Tan Lin's "Disco as Operating System, Part One," *Criticism,* 2008 (p.95).

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into a remix having minimal harmonic or melodic progression, and grounded in repetition. This subtraction would be exploited in the late seventies and early eighties with Eurodisco, Italodisco, minimal ambient house musics; contemporary artist writing/distribution projects; and a host of disco-oriented stylistics and sampling/appropriation-based poetries. (Tan Lin, "Disco as Operating System," 92-93)

Seemingly, empty of content and adrift from validation by some "greater" or grounding thesis (i.e. an audiophile's/collector's idiosyncracies) disco appears to form a closed system as mimetic function of digital archivization processes. Transmitting a pulse from disco track-to-disc jockey-to-dancer-and-back, we gain access to moods or "data inaccessible to human memory."[72] In effect, disco, true to its French origins *discothèque*, is a library of phonograph recordings. If you will, the night-clubber's "archival system." However, examined under the mood-kill lighting for Fuller's techno-materialist gaze, by which we form an epistemological model for conceiving of objects, things appear more sinister and expansive. Disco is a pre-determining, highly systematized apparatus.[73] Effectively, here Lin's account extends Fuller's auto-generative logic of mechanicity and reproductivity. We shift from objects being metaobjects within a broader system to objects being systems of metaobjects. Disco is a repository that is generative of more data that, as data, generates more repository. This appears consistent with idea that the laugh track is an ever-expanding generative loop of archivation. Certainly it would be tempting to conclude that the very form of its content determines both the recipe for more content and the

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[72] Ibid. p.93
[73] A material thing's status as object refers primarily to its categorized instrumentality. Which effectively institutes a system's preceding mechanicity.

regulative bounds by which it has been inscribed within the broadcast industry. However, as we shall explore, the laugh track also deviates from the strictures of its being a reserve and from the forming of one.

In following Fuller's thinking, we grasp how objects and their storage media may be fully circumscribed as serving the systems from which they emerge. Still, although we may account for the over-arching techno-instrumentality governing the systems that classify, collect, store, assemble and produce objects need our conception of the modern archive be entirely circumscribed by this modern day scheme of functionality? In other words, is the archive merely a repository of "materials?"

Chapter Five: Foucault, Function and the Archive

To take steps towards engaging the laugh track as an electro-mechanical archival system, I have been attempting to engage a materialist-based thinking about technology and contemporary memory storage media. By this thinking, we may experience material production and media formations as dynamic and self-generative processes. From Fuller's metaobjects and storage container to Lin's account of disco contemporary systems of objects are, though arguably making for a highly controlled and predictable world, always transforming, proliferating, faltering and reconfiguring, as it may appear, without some overarching and totalizing directive or order. However, though we may grasp that these self-turning contemporary storage systems are at once generative of more objects/data and for more storage capacity, the analysis has remained within the circuitry of serviceability.[74] In all, we have been focused on data/memory storage mediums as being, in a very general sense, instruments of technology. Still, although contemporary archival systems may be accessible as functions of technology we are no closer to understanding what informs our engagement with what may be principally thought as *the archive*. Thus, apart from explanations of the technological mechanisms by which the activity of archiving or even the system-making of archiving gets executed and maintained, there are questions with respect to the principles/rules and forces by which the archive may be governed.[75]

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[74] It is the computer software that expands, transforms, archivates and de-archivates to facilitate the data designated as "records," "documents" or "materials." Further, it is the hard-drives or electronic engines which run the software that are the main fixed means for guaranteeing the vast variability of needed quantification for a reserve that makes and maintains space and time for future amassing and (re)configuring.

[75] In other words, what is it that precedes but certainly persists via its various instrumentalized mediatic orderings and has permitted its particular formations within history as a formation that gives order to things?

Towards addressing the archive as *its own* formation, in this chapter, I turn to Foucault's non-instrumental account of the archive in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. By Foucault's account, the archive is a formation that has its own rules prior to and independent of the very history of the documents and artefacts of which it is comprised. The archive precedes the discursive and mediatic mechanisms that make of the past *a past* or thing of knowledge. Accordingly, the archive is not a site of mediation, it is not a conduit nor a function of knowledge-making. The archive, as Foucault tells us, is active all on its own for forming rules for, either in discursive or non-discursive formations, what may come to presence.

With the discussion now re-directed towards Foucault's conception of the archive, the question arises: How may one approach a system that is prior to our description of things? That is, if we are to explore the laugh track as its own archival formation, how might we avoid re-inscribing instrumentalist terms into the analysis? To wit, the archive is what permits Foucault's archaeological approach to discursive formations. Archaeology allows for a studied description of the precedent formations for how a knowledge of things may come into being. Accordingly, it permits approaching the archive as its own evolving complex of processes. As we shall see, Foucault demonstrates the functioning of the archive in terms that are not bound by conceptual order and/or productive causal mechanisms. Here, learning from Foucault's account of the archive and archaeological approach, we may revisit the earlier discussion concerning *function*. Instead, by conceiving of function prior to its implementation as a mediating term, Foucault recasts function within a system of making that *is* in the making. Further, the turn towards an archaeological approach thus anticipates the coming pivotal point at which we may encounter the laugh track formation, rather than a "means to an end," as a gesture or "pure means." We thus get closer to examining the laugh track's form of paradox. For all intents and purposes, I am

aligning Agamben's idea of the gesture as "pure means" with Foucault's putting into question there being an authorizing or commanding mechanism that governs the formation of the archive. Accordingly, we arrive at the radical formulation that the archive as "pure means" is an unlawful law.

Of What the (Classical) Archives May Permit

> The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities; that which determines that they do not withdraw at the same pace in time, but shine, as it were, like stars, some that seem close to us shining brightly from afar off, while others that are in fact close to us are already growing pale. (Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 129)

With Foucault's help, we shift from accounting for a generalized notion of memory systems, even objects in their own right, as designed to save and manage content or operate as servant to the preservation and representation of the past, to an unbounded and somehow always-altering system. It is a system that permits of things the formation of particular details, their orderings and kinds of articulations. Foucault, as if responding to Matthew Fuller's somewhat social integrationist network (even applied media's epistemological engine), challenges the functionalist inclination to grasp the archive as circumscribed by our contemporary industrio-political system. No doubt for Foucault, the archive, be it as public records holder, is a site for ongoing squabbles or power plays over claiming authority in whatever civic matter. However beyond such provincial interest, he conceives of the archive as, in some fashion or another, generative of the very terms for which such kinds of exchanges may arise. Effectively, Foucault directs us toward thinking of the archive non-container-wise. If anything, the archive is that which "permits" the uncontained. For Foucault, looking past the purposivity of modern *techne*, the archive is not a particular discourse or instrument of discourse, nor a platform or medium. The main point is that, the archive is not an isolable and potential sequence of intersecting events on a timeline. Rather, by Foucault's analytic, we encounter the archive as historical process at the moments that, within the always-contingent flux and dispersivity of history,[76] permits whatever statements arising as history. Generally considered, Foucault has restricted his focus to what may be considered as the classical text-based archive. In keeping with the analytic on discourse formation central to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he declares it as *the system that governs the appearance of "statements as unique events."* Effectively, he has linked the archive to a system that regulates history in terms of discursive formations. But, as we will explore in the

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[76] As an always preceding formation or *historical a priori* of what gets called history.

coming chapters, especially as relates to media archaeology and approaches to exploring the laugh track beyond being culturally purposive, Foucault's statement on the governance of the archive extends to accounting for media formations as regulated by processes other than discursive, *vis a vis* quantificatory and machinic. Though focused on the history of technological formations, the media archaeologist grasps the material artefact very much as Foucault engages discursive formations. Always the guiding question for Foucault and media archaeologists is: how are the organizing elements of a system permitted, regulated and authorized? In accordance with Foucault, the media archaeologist conceives the workings of the archive as being generative of the facts by which we interpret both media and its attendant discursive formations.

With that said, by Foucault we grasp that the archive is not active as memory aid or as a device that has as its fixed design cognitive-like subject specifying attributes. It is not simply, as is commonly thought, a container for holding information (data, material) that is to be at some point in the future deciphered as knowledge. For Foucault, simply put, the archive precedes that productive apparatus. The archive is generative of the very rules by which the past comes to be formed. Its positivity, in effect, proceeds by negation. That is, what gets permitted, selected, ordered, spoken of etc. must occur with respect to what the archive does and does not permit to be devised in an accounting for things.[77]

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[77] We note from the above quote that Foucault gives a sense of how appearances of statements are governed. There is no predictive schema or commonsensical cause-effect mechanism by which we can chart or account for the operations of the archive. The *idea* of being observers of the archive as if it were a knowable and bounded apparatus is mere abstraction, historically determined by pre-ceding and perhaps receding historical processes. Even temporal proximity to things is without a ready-to-hand logic or roadmap for navigating what's probable. Foucault, in likening statements to celestial bodies, poeticizes "some that seem close to us shining brightly from afar off, while others that are in fact close to us are already growing pale." And yet, for Foucault the archive as system regulates the linguistic processes by which we appropriate things

Archaeology of Knowledge and the "Seen" and "Said"

Foucault challenges the "implicit causal discourse" that at once gives force to the classical historian's ordered accounts. Though seemingly just targeting the historian, as just outlined, Foucault's thinking represents a broadly applicable approach to examining the generative mechanisms for ordering, structuring and constituting the logic upon which propositions of order and causality seemingly naturally occur. Foucault resists thinking and characterizing *knowledge* as a reasoned and an *a*historical enterprise. He avoids treating (the history of) knowledge as a soluble puzzle that, if solved, will provide clarity to an epistemological base for then doing a history. Rather, Foucault explores reasoning as a form of control or bringing order to what does not speak and that lacks intelligibility. Accordingly, he invents his own method, as will be discussed below, to attend to the silenced and dismissed deviant elements that inhabit the exclusionary mechanisms of any knowledge formation. Against western philosophical authorization, he thwarts making appeals to a universal *principia*. There is no positing of a metaphysical realm for grounding inductions and deductions in an apophantic mechanism that authorizes *kind* and *certainty*. Instead, knowledge and its logical moorings, though highly productive, are to be reckoned with as reactive formations generated within power relations. We hereby come by our knowledge(s), past and present, through force. Knowledge, it

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in time. As operation that is certainly within language **-** as if language were the materials for its operations as our pre-hensive engagements **-** the archive through its formations permits statements on what's seen and said. It shapes what comes to be perceived as the rules determining the very gamut of possibility for which and of how things may be connected, dispersed and are even without regulation.

appears, is made through systematic, normalized and routine state-sanctioned violence that imposes *good* sense on sense and sensations.[78]

With ironic authorial-undermining of the possible universalizing of his own claims concerning knowledge, Foucault institutes an arch*ae*ological approach to the rules that permit an institution's authority for formalizing a discursive practice. Inscriptions and dictums are *never* just made, they are permitted to be and to be articulations by the terms of an authorizing registry, that is, by a sanctioned legible propositional standard. Again, the form and force of that making, though imposing an order, need not be rational. For Foucault, regulatory forces are akin the lasting impacting presence of police. They serve to impose upon subsequent conceptual gatherings a parametric and/or spatial design for a particular formation of discursivity. Or rather, for how a discipline-specific logic is developed and executed. From this perspective the archive, the very system under which Foucault's form of archaeology comes into operation is extraordinary. The archive's generative powers are near unfathomable. This is because the laws of its system are both generative of discourse and can transform the very system that permits a discursive practice's formation. So then, how does archaeology permit exploring the archive? Further, how does archaeology permit examining media formations like the laugh track?

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault wrestles history from the rationalist and interpretative schemas of historians that have been deployed to link together a series of events to form cohesive narratives.[79] Targeting the historian, Foucault puts into question the actual role or the privilege and authority granted to the historian as the one with access to a "behind the

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[78] In effect, the things and experiences that very likely precede and determine the reasoning that gets deployed in governing what is routinely categorized as *body* and *materiality*.

[79] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, p. 137.

scenes" progression. Actually, Foucault conceives of the traditional historian very much as he accounts for the formation of *subject*[80] and *authorship.* These two terms that play prominent roles in organizing western thinking are inventions constituted by institutions, discourses and power relations. In effect, the historian is her/his own historical formation generated within the schemes and strategies of a particular discursive practice.[81] In another sense, Foucault rejects the belief that historical events and documents harbour a secret, a hidden illusory truth or something essential about our human activities. Counter to providing grandiose explanations for history, Foucault limits his focus to the procedures and rules that give order and formation to our practice. Thus, we understand to analyze a discursive practice (for example, the formation of a 17th and 18th general grammar) Foucault takes inventory of the particular field of relations that permit the formation of that discourse. This approach to history, as will be evident in the next Part, is highly instructive for media archaeology and the methods by which I explore the laugh track as a media formation. Still, just as important as an approach will be, we need register that an inventory of a field of relations holds no potential as explanatory schemes. In fact, these relations, so Foucault contends, are prior to any manufacturing of a thought-out program for rationalizing particular elements of a system.

> … it is no longer necessary to appeal to the themes of an endlessly withdrawing
> origin and an inexhaustible horizon: the organization of a group of rules in the
> practice of discourse, even if it does not constitute an event so easy to situate as a
> formulation or a discovery, may be determined, however, in the element of
> history; and if it is inexhaustible, it is by that very fact that the perfectly

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[80] Regarding the constitution of the subject Ibid. pp.51-55
[81] Ibid. p.136

describable system that it constitutes takes account of a very considerable set of

concepts and a very large number of transformations that affect both these

concepts and their relations. Instead of outlining a horizon that rises from the

depths of history and maintains itself through history, the "preconceptual" thus

described is, on the contrary, at the most "superficial level" (at the level of

discourse), the group of rules that in fact operate within it. (Michel Foucault, *The*

Archaeology of Knowledge, 62)

We note that the "preconceptual" does not preclude concepts from being a part of discursive

formations. Concepts are but elements in a set of relations that includes other things such as

"forms of deduction," "derivation," "coherence," "intersection," "substitution," "exclusion,"

"mutual alteration," "displacement."[82] Specifically, the "preconceptual" represents the realm in

which a series of formations take place.[83] Accordingly, Foucault sees archaeology as the task of

making a spreadsheet like account of relations. For Foucault, there is no room for traditional

historical presuppositions of there being a pre-set backdrop of machinations by which the

functions of a society, a system, or an historical event may be founded and understood. As Gilles

Deleuze states, Foucault's archaeological analysis is confined to what is permitted to be "seen"

and "said."

But in fact there is nothing prior to knowledge, because knowledge, in Foucault's

new concept of it, is defined by the combinations of visible and articulable that

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[82] Ibid. p.60
[83] Ibid. p.59

are unique to each stratum or historical formation. Knowledge is practical assemblage, a "mechanism" of statements and visibilities. There is therefore nothing behind knowledge (although, as we shall see, there are things outside knowledge). (Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, 51)

Foucault conceives of archaeology as a practice for defining and as being defined by the surface interplay of historical processes.[84] His is an analysis by which the constituting of knowledge, the objects or the component parts of a discourse, reads as an intricate production-line process.[85] Archaeology has no explanatory powers. Instead, it is the "systematic description of a discourse-object."[86]

Function? Or rather, a *System of its Functioning*?

In Part Two, I examine how Foucault's approach to discourse translates to the media archaeologist's approach towards media. In effect, archaeology becomes central to exploring the laugh track in less instrumentalist terms and as its own archival formation. However, apart from the potential for doing archaeology instead of a standard history of the laugh track, Foucault describes the archive in a way that addresses issues raised earlier concerning the notion of *function*. We recall function was examined as a particular figure of knowledge that lends authority to certain presuppositions about the workings of media. By the transmission model of

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[84] In contrast, the historian (of ideas) who in accounting for historical transformations outlines "a horizon that arises from the depths of history and maintains itself through history" Foucault conducts his analysis "at the most 'superficial' level (at the level of discourse)." Ibid. p.62

[85] We recall, Foucault regards writing the history of discursive objects as its own form of assemblage that requires the deployment of "the nexus of regularities" that come to constitute their manifold formations. Ibid. pp. 47-48

[86] Ibid. p.140

communication, *function* gives explanatory force to reductively theorizing "the communicable,"

communication and mediums for conveyance according to isolable goals (i.e., sending messages

between source and receiver). And by the ritual theory, the term gets deployed to enable

interpreting the effects of media according to a socially integrative model that *always already*

gives place and purpose to communication/media. Foucault's description of the archive as a

system of its functioning provides us with an alternative expression to what covertly serves the

cogency of a theory, specifically, of what gives theoretical impetus to the cultural historian's

analysis of media. In effect, Foucault's version of function circumvents the programmatic to

describe media in purposive and instrumentalist terms. Thus, for the coming exploration of the

laugh track, the notion of functioning re-orients our descriptions of organizing elements and

seeming catalysts as emerging from within the makings of media formations.

Throughout much of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, "function," within the generative

operations of a system, registers a system's devised juncture for executing a discursive procedure

(i.e. the policeman as street-warden actively maintaining the laws of public order). In the

broadest etiological sense, function may thus have the appearance of a trigger-type mechanism

with a causal character. However, for Foucault, more in terms of what they actually do, *functions*

are circumscribed by a discipline's formative process. Functions are given play as instrument for

re-inscribing and re-asserting the power or authority of a discursive practice. By this application,

functions are conceived counter to the transmission and ritual theorist's idea of things. They are

not causal nodes set within a generalized observational schema that provide a theory its

explanatory force. Rather, for Foucault, functions are a system's "officially sanctioned" methods

for enforcement, verification and authorization. However, in the chapter "The Historical *a priori*

and the Archive," Foucault presents a variation on function *vis a vis* "functioning" that is, as

opposed to an expression of rules, a formative activity. We instead encounter *function* as a *pre-conceptual* operation. Outlining the archive as authorizing system for discourse, Foucault writes:

> The archive is not that which, despite its immediate escape, safeguards the event
> of the statement, and preserves, for future memories, its status as an escapee; it is
> that which, at the very root of the statement-event, and in that which embodies it,
> defines at the outset the *system of its enunciability*. Nor is the archive that which
> collects the dust of statements that have become inert once more, and which may
> make possible the miracle of their resurrection; it is that which defines the mode
> of occurrence of the statement-thing; it is *the system of its functioning*. Far
> from being that which unifies everything that has been said in the great
> confused murmur of a discourse, far from being only that which ensures
> that we exist in the midst of preserved discourse, it is that which differ-
> entiates discourses in their multiple existence and specifies them in their
> own duration. (Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 128-129)

Though *the archive* may be thought as a mere holding chamber where statements are forever
preserved (in document or print material form), Foucault declares it to be an active dynamic
force in how we actually form statements. The archive, by default, has governance in the
formation and transformation of knowledge. By *the system of its functioning*, the archive
differentiates discursive formations while delimiting the duration of their appearance. In other
words, its formation sets the terms and specifics, in the most discrete and specifying sense, for
the material registry of whatever discursive offering. However, by describing the archive as
the system of its functioning, Foucault is not identifying mechanisms that are in service of a

system's productive outcomes. That would be to re-instate a source to results regimen. But, by what we grasp, for Foucault, the archive lacks the authorial, cohesive or coherent presence of arbiter of fact. Rather, Foucault gets us to focus on the force and formation of a system. His notion of functioning and/or function precedes epistemological import and our accounting for productive gain. *Functioning* refers back to the system it forms, indicating that and how things are being operationalized. It is bereft of causal efficacy or having the role of triggering an effect for a system. In this sense, we engage *function* as the ongoing re-instituting of particular determinations that maintain a system as formation or process.

Further, apart from recasting function as a system-reflexive action, Foucault's account of the archive as a goal-less and indeterminate formation will provide the critical point at which my examination of the laugh track diverges from the main of media archaeology. Media anarchaeologist Siegfried Zielinski extends this radical insight for upending the media archaeologist's belief that the archive reveals a medium's generativity. For Zielinski, the archive is hereby impotent if it only permits accounts of knowable and potential media formations. By the media archaeologist's limited interpretation of Foucault, the archive in effect blocks access to what is not knowable and to that which is without potential. In practice, Zielinski is at odds with media archaeologists over the narrow application of a "seen" and "said" governed approach. For him, what may be seen and said is quite possibly entirely inaccessible to any program of investigation predicated on positive display. Rather, in following Zielinski, we may describe the form and force of the laugh track as a system that is outside a metrics restricted to the registerable features of a medium's quantificatory prowess.

This is significant because it permits engaging the laugh track in terms of what it does not

show through its various processes of exhaustion.
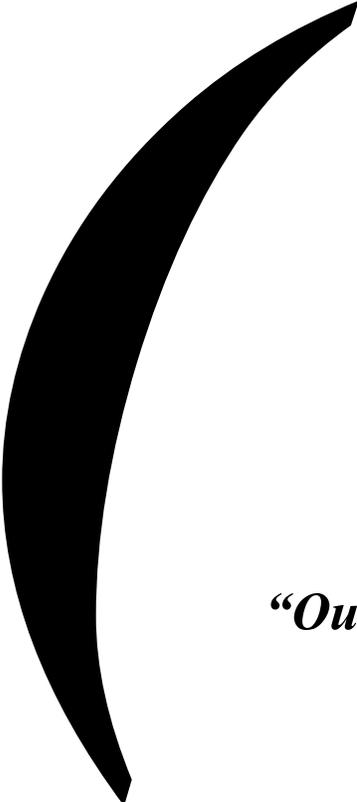
Laughing **"Outside" the Box**

Introduction (for Part Two)

I have placed Part Two within the graphic signification that typically indicates a broadcast studio cue. It is just like a TV script prompt for signalling the appropriate moment to insert audience laughter. However, more metaphorically considered, the parentheses signify a break from narrative constructions engendered by Foucault's archaeology. Effectively, his approach cues my exploration of the laugh track as its own archival formation. I explore the laugh track as a system of its functioning disconnected from human-centred mechanisms for explaining or describing a medium's role and transformations. As we have seen, an archaeological approach rejects the cultural and classical historian's linear or category delineating strategies that would ultimately reduce the laugh track to a tool within a broader scheme of production. Rather, we may approach the laugh track as it comes to interact with and quite possibly transform other schemes of production. In other words, I explore the laugh track as it shows and performs otherwise to its being a means to an end. It is from this vantage point that we may, in Part three, then explore the laugh track as an instance of uselessness. And, consequently, to explore how uselessness may be an integral part of media formations.

Over the next four chapters I bring to focus how the laugh track is an archivo-material media formation. In step with Foucault's descriptive methodology, I deploy a media archaeological approach to account for the laugh track. Specifically, I engage the laugh track by "seen" and "said" precepts developed by media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst and media theorist Friedrich Kittler. Ernst and Kittler enable us to work through the dispersive nature of stored information and how it dictates the manner in which we actually account for media. Ultimately, through their approach we may calibrate our discourse by the interruption, displacement and

discontinuity engendered by our media systems. However, though my research of the laugh track

is governed by a certain archaeological impulse, in order to directly explore the laugh track as its

own form of archival system, I take from key insights by cultural historians regarding the laugh

track. The work of sound performance theorist Jacob Smith along with the deconstructionist

account of digital humanist Jeff Scheible, though extending the orthodox discursive approach I

reject in Part One, is worthwhile. They help to open onto an articulation of the laugh track that

contributes to digging into its past as an industrialized system of production.

Chapter Six: A History of Recorded Laughter

Attention thus far has been on developing an approach that permits exploring the laugh track as its own media formation. This has meant countering the prevailing analysis and its theoretical framework for positing the laugh track as a function relative to the main content of broadcast production. To examine the laugh track as its own formation, I now place the discussion within the domain considered proper to its being a sound effect. Set within the history of sound reproduction technology, we gain traction concerning relevant inventive processes. Further, we examine material instances of the laugh track as a transforming routine mechanical operation both within and apart from the industrialized operations of North American radio and television broadcasting. This will set the scene for later examining, in chapter nine, the laugh track as materio-archival formation in relation to the broadcast regime of the late 1940s and onward. There, I explore the regulatory mechanisms that necessitate the material presence of laugh tracks. How, within the broadcast industry frame of scheduling, audience rating techniques, the division of labor running the spectrum from "creator" to "technician," as well as the system of inventing and patenting, this archival regime became its own commercial entity and standard in the form of the Laff Box machine. Again, Kittler and Ernst will be helpful for navigating a media system's possible divergences for how it shows. However, before such consolidation in the form of a laugh machine, the inventive forces for the contemporary laugh track may be assessed in parallel to preceding experiments in automata and other mechanical instruments made for either simulating or emitting the human voice. In this respect, there is much to draw on for grasping the archivative constitution of the laugh track. Consistent with the theme of being open to the laugh track, and media in general, as pure means we get a handle on

generative processes that, rather than being driven by inventors, drive invention. Leading up to the electric age of machines, inventions in sound reproduction technologies establish a particular realm for encountering *the human* through non-human systems that approximate, proliferate and transmit *relatable* sounds. The sound theorists Jacob Smith and Jonathan Sterne help to understand these historical processes in divergent ways. Smith directly examines the history of recorded laughter. He ties its various developments to human performance and physiology. Conversely, Sterne provides insight into how sound technologies in general are distinct processes analyzable independently of mind and body. Ultimately, though I will take issue with Smith's dualist account, what we get from both their analyses is an understanding of how vocal emissions, generated from hand-operated machines, create the space for analyzing the material registry and replication systems that comprise the contemporary laugh track.

Machine-Produced Visceral

To understand the laugh track within the history of voice recording, sound and performance studies scholar Jacob Smith examines the relation between the listener and the actual materials or mechanical sound recordings. Smith tells us that the earliest recordings of laughter had a role other than that of demonstrating the technical prowess of a machine. It did not only display a gramophone or "speaking machine's" capacity for reproducing sounds. Laughter conveyed a viscerality that was meant to engage listeners through a bodily affinity with a machine's effusion. Smith writes,

> Notably, the use of the laugh to demonstrate the virtuosity of talking machines has
> an even earlier origin in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century talking machines

of Wolfgang von Kempelen and Joseph Faber. Kempelen, most famous for his

automaton chess-player, also designed a keyboard-operated machine that could

imitate the vocal organs (Patrick Feaster). Later, Faber designed a similar

speaking machine that featured the torso of a "Turk" and a more convenient

keyboard. The *Illustrated London News* noted in 1846 that the machine was

capable not only of speech but also "even whispering, laughing and singing: all

this depending on the agility of the director in manipulating the keys" (Feaster

2000). As with early phonographic demonstrations, the laugh was presented as the

spontaneous creaturely expression of authentic embodiment, capable of

transcending the limits of mechanical reproduction. (Jacob Smith, "Frenzy of the

Audible," 24-25)

    Generally considered, early mechanically produced and later gramophone cylinder

reproductions of the human voice, though at first appearing as sources of fascination and marvel

(given their capability for replication and storage), were also designed to impact the senses. The

auditory experience could trigger empathy within the listener with certain sounds (known as

empathaphonia). Somewhat spontaneously, through association with a recorded sound, one

might have appropriately accompanying muscular sensations, often some kind of localized

spasm. In a word, the listener felt, to some degree, physically impacted. Ultimately, Smith's

point is that extra-discursive sounds like laughter helped the listener to overcome the alienated

feelings they had towards a non-human mechanical sound-emitting object.[87]

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[87] The idea here is that with the novelty of machine-generated speech, music or worldly sounds
having somewhat dissipated listening was transformed from attentiveness to spoken word
content and the quality of its conveyance into a participatory or bodily experience.

For Smith, the catalyst for transformation of machine-generated speech being a novelty to participatory was early 20th century capitalism. He surmises that making audio technology more relatable was born of a strategy for more widely marketing gramophone recordings. Given this industry objective, the target audience was not North America's social elite. Rather, the burgeoning gramophone industry took aim at the disposable income of the large and rapidly expanding working class. Smith points out that often recordings of "hi-brow" performances, be they orchestral presentations, were replete with a slowly increasing crescendo of "lo-brow" associated involuntary bodily emissions (sneezes, hiccups, giggles).[88] By exploiting class attributes (i.e. vulgarity), to somewhat reiterate, the gramophone became less apparent as an invention. Its mechanico-pragmatic possibilities as sound – even message – storing device were obscured. Instead, it was highly active as purveyor of sentiment. Accordingly, whatever anxiety and reluctance was felt over the "disembodied" sound-generating device was "sutured" by a machine's capacity for triggering (a sense of) bodily response.

Unlike Kalviknes Bore and other laugh track theorists, Smith does not assume reproduced laughter and the laugh track are a means for simulating a sense of "liveness." For Kalviknes Bore, the laugh track is ahistorical. It is distilled as a concentrate of a generalized notion of technology. Thereby, the laugh track exists as device in service of a system of exchange. Instead, Smith pursues the material investments of vocal reproductions as part of a history wherein there is a fundamental need for a visceral connection between *human* and *machine*. In some respects, for which I explore the philosophical underpinnings in the next

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[88] Such sounds often emanated from a recording's audience-members, sometimes even from one of the performers themselves. Ultimately, the effusions escalated and staged a recorded presentation's degeneration into a cathartic free-for-all of laughter (for example, the "Okeh Laughing Record," released in 1922).

chapter, Smith actually examines the workings of sound technology as if another viscera. Here, the point being, machines of the voice are conceived as a humanized registry. They invoke because they are connected to *human being*. With the idea that laughter is so integral to human behaviour he asks: How might that need for connecting arise? For my exploration of the laugh track, Smith's theoretical commitments diverge from exploring the laugh track as its own media formation. However, the orientation of Smith's research gets us closer to the laugh track as a material transformative process. In my estimation, examining sound technologies as regimes of objectivation ultimately clear a path for exploring the laugh track as media archival formation.

Psychic Apparatus

In a section of Vocal Tracks playfully titled "The Canned Uncanny: Laughing Machines," Jacob Smith speculates on a way to merge the categories of the human and the mechanical. Beyond articulating the connection of laughter-reproducing technologies to social and economic formations, Smith is held captive by the profundity of the connection. He probes how particular responses to laugh recordings may be authorized by a structural predisposition. In effect, he wants to locate overt physiological impulses in the workings of the human unconscious.

Analyzing recorded laughter as a source of anxiety, Smith questions: "Why was the recorded laugh felt to be so powerfully disturbing?"[89] Pushing past Henri Bergson's powerful insight into how laughter as social sanction against mechanical behaviour represents a potent

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[89] See Jacob Smith's *Vocal Tracks,* p.45.

index for *the human* (so knitted into our social engagements), Smith turns to Sigmund Freud to articulate the psychic apparatus that permits the elision.[1] He taps the logic of Freud's theory of the uncanny. Finding a parallel with Freud's famous account of witnessing an epileptic undergoing spasms, Smith offers that our "being disturbed" by canned laughter may have been the result of a category uncertainty vested in (a generalized experience of) mechanicality *itself*. When observed, the break in another's "normal behaviour" is often thought to be directed by external automatic, machine-driven operations. Here, the observer of the epileptic bout loses grip on the standard human/automata divide. The so-called inanimate appears to come alive. In the presence of inexplicable forces, the observing consciousness becomes the subject of its own pre-structuration. The observer is shaken. They are not the ground of being, the source or authority for determining what and how things are witnessed. With this "hard line" between human organism and machine momentarily put under erasure, the machine comes to presence as organic life. Likewise, "life" appears to move like the typical machine. As with Freud's account of observing an epileptic fit, for Smith laughter *itself*, as demonstrated through involuntary body spasms and erratic vocal effusions, blurs the line between mechanical and human. The human animated by an uncontrolled force is here the sign of its humanness as a fluidly instinctive social organism. Put in another way, we have become predisposed towards our being abstracted as an abstract being.[90] In essence, this lurking psychological mechanism that stages an uncanny impression is how for Smith canned laughter "was so powerfully disturbing." It reveals one's inexplicable readiness to be drawn in by an inhabited sense perpetrated by a recording. Effectively, by this thinking recorded laughter carries human presence through mechanical

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[90] In this case and period of time (since Cartesian rationalism one may presume) an automatonic presence.

means. It is a performative of what is recorded. Recorded laughter is then the means for there being human presence.

For Smith, the history of the vocal/laughter-emitting producing and reproducing machines proceeds by an opposition between machine and body. Regardless of proximity to humanness, laugh recordings are thought to traverse a chasm. In the next chapter, I will focus on the nature and consequences of this opposition for Smith. This dualism, as it *appears,* simply further entrenches the analysis of sound technologies within the divide between speaking and writing. Nevertheless, as we shall see, this is a philosophistic strategy. Smith deploys the dualism more to produce a narrative of sound technologies than to subsume sound studies to linguistics. Regardless, in both ways, we are diverted from understanding the laugh track as a media formation. At each turn for potentially exploring the laugh track or recorded laughter as its own technological formation, Smith halts analysis. He stops short of engaging the inventive processes of laugh recordings in a way that may, perhaps without reason, open onto other regimes of mediation and production. Instead, systematically, instances of mechanicalized laughter are always rationalized. They are plotted on an anthropocentric time-line for fitting part to whole – obviously covering psychic authoring, economic realities, social and behavioural mechanics. The media in question is always treated as a system of a broader discursive functioning. I, of course, propose going in the opposite direction with my exploration. By engaging with the laugh track as a system of its functioning, I abandon engaging things by a linking mechanism. In effect, I do not see the need to impart transparency to the dense opacity of a media thing.

Mechanicalizing Memory

Though focused on reconciling the relation of machine to body, Smith, whether intended or not, actually leads us to valuable observations about the mechanization of laughter independent of 20th century broadcasting. In addition to having a role in the advancement of vocal producing technologies, laughter was (as with the von Kempelen talking machine) mechanically rendered for its own sake,[91] perhaps more accurately, as a proto-laugh track. The speech-machine did not only emit laughs. By the regulated operations of simulated vocal mechanisms, it made a repeatable routine of vocalizing, of (re)-producing laughter. The main point being, the contemporary broadcast industry's archival regime of producing laugh tracks, though reliant on 20th century automated technologies predicated on electromagnetic principles, may have received its mechanicalized formula/cue well in advance of its particular mode of mediation. In a conceptual sense, the machine's routine operation (of laughter) for storing and manufacturing well precedes its cultural use. And, in an applied sense, the human voice becomes instrumentalized as a hand and/or touch-controlled technology. Not unlike musical wind instruments (horns, clarinets), speech-machines operationalized "the voice."[92] Early voice (re)-production technologies (inscription-based or tympanic membrane-based) helped to inaugurate automaticity. Narrowly considered, inventors acquired the means for making a material or engineered object speak. More broadly considered, however, the very program of a systematized material grafting of audio registration and methods of encoding, though derived from human physiology, meant that operations of a sound-emitting apparatus were constructed as independent

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[91] We note the term soundtrack was first coined in 1929 – within the context of cinematic production presumably the first time audio was materially isolable as recording. "Track" itself is an audio recording term associated with magnetic tape recording technology. Of course, well prior to this there were dog tracks, race tracks, horse tracks etc ...

[92] This featured a system of levers regulating air passage within tubes.

of the human arbiter.[93] This insight is crucial for my analysis. It provides the springboard from which I launch my exploration into the archivo-mediatic character of the laugh track. The sound effect may not only be grasped in terms of a machine's responsiveness or mediation (within a cultural sphere of a broadcast/audience discursive) but also by the particular logical and illogical orderings of a technology.

In this regard, Jonathan Sterne's work is very helpful. In his book *The Audible Past* – a history focused largely on formative moments[94] of the earliest of sound reproduction technologies/machine (i.e. the phonograph with cylinder or the telephone with code-plate)[95] – Sterne emphasizes how inventors of sound reproduction machines were most captivated by recording instruments as sovereign operations. These various inventions provided one with new and ideal methods for preserving and encountering the past that was not restricted to human mental capabilities. Developments in audio technologies of the early 1800s inspired the dream of an infinitely repeatable and permanent 1:1 representation of and engagement with (persons of) "the past" (that could be simply played back on a machine set to decipher machine-encoded recordings of speech, music, etc). The gramophone, for instance, went beyond memory prompt or glimpse at the past. Rather, it held the potential for constructing an archive, with the greatly increased capacity for storage of fully recallable memories, that forever sounded voices of the past in the present (and beyond).[96]

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[93] See James Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation Modernity* (Film and Culture Series). New York: Columbia University Press, 2000 (pp.31-35).
[94] See Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past,* p.28.
[95] As mechanism for transferring so-called source sound to an automated medium.
[96] Of course, the dream met its practical limits fairly soon into the life of wax cylinder recordings. Sterne points out that these early inventions of mechanical entombment were and "are notoriously fragile and difficult to hear. They require careful and attentive storage and

In moving further into the existing research on auditory engineering, alongside Sterne, we are prompted thus to explore both the general problematic *if* and *how* the form of mechanicality indicates historical continuity within media. Most germane to my analysis the methodological question arises: how do we examine technological inventions either in terms of discontinuity or as deviating from a universal timeline?[97]

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ginger use. Listening to those early cylinders often brings confusion and clarity in equal doses to the auditor." Ibid. p. 288

[97] Much more narrowly, without a universal compass, how may we then explore the proto-laugh track as pre-cedent to current archival formations?

Chapter Seven: Contending with a Conditioned Absence

When the woman in the laughing record floods out,[98] the one-to-one situation between listener and performer is altered, because there are now at least two audience members. The listener's role is suddenly made uncertain, free-floating. Is the listener part of an audience or over-hearing this performance? The woman's flooding out precipitates the listener's frame reorganization: The listener has lost a certain formal connection with the performer but has gained a relationship to the laughing audience member, who has broached the ritual constraints of the situation. (Jacob Smith, "Frenzy of the Audible," 28)

As outlined in the last chapter, Jacob Smith gets us to research the laugh track's origins beyond the historical development of radio and television.[99] Recorded laughter, as with other kinds of vocal recordings, developed within trajectories of invention that precede and diverge from the 20th century industrialization of sound technologies. Again, as with the above account

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[98] "Floods out" here means: involuntarily breaking into or being overcome with laughter.

[99] Smith very nimbly navigates an analysis of recorded laughter within and in relation to the "ideology of liveness" along with the historical transformations of the TV and radio broadcast industry. As stated, his work is a vital prompt for investigating the phenomenon with respects to its particular acoustic and mechanical properties.

of the presence of laughter on early commercial phonograph recordings, Smith's goal is, in part, to make understandable the connective tissue between human vocal performance and machines. Here he makes a visceral link between a pressing's evocative content and an audience's "live" sensory receptors. Through unconscious psychological mechanisms, the gulf between so-called immediate or live experience and the recorded sound disconnected from the listener's present is traversed. However, apart from accounting for the "connection" between listener and a recording, Smith certainly appears to go much further. For his analysis, he inscribes *the human* into *the technological*. He absorbs a machine's history within the unfurling of a social or humanist trajectory. Though his analysis, at times, appears to entertain being circumscribed by the horizon of mechanically produced sound, in the end, he inculcates the significance of the non-mechanical-live experience of sound in the development of the recorded technologies.

In following Jonathan Sterne's insightful analysis of the structural coordinates often circumscribing the discipline of sound studies, we understand how Smith situates the laugh track within a broader narrative of media transformations which features the human and the *techne*. Ultimately, this dualism impedes engaging the laugh track as its own formation. The human, not just conceived as aggregate of bodily processes but as always-present temporal gauge, restricts media to being a social trajectory. In direct contrast to Smith's rather formidable research, digital humanities theorist Jeff Scheible prompts analysis of the laugh track as graphic formation or, more specifically, textual inscription. Scheible, countering oral-biased usages of laughter, "sees" the laugh track as suggestive of an anxiety divergent from Smith's suture theory. It is an anxiety over conveying meaning. Scheible notes that the laugh track often, within the written registry of industry script form, appears in brackets. The laugh track takes form inaudibly, concealing

textual inadequacies. It represents an author's covering for meanings that are not and cannot be heard.

In what follows, I examine how both these stories of media proceed by the strategic positioning of their analyses of the laugh track. Their contributions play off of and indirectly reinforce the discipline of sound studies' theoretical "mainframe." This, traditionally, has been organized by the two opposing philo-historical camps, *oral* and *graphic/written*. However, all will not be lost in an entanglement of age-old quarrels. Their analyses provide my exploring the laugh track as a discrete media formation with a decisive opening. Upon clarifying Smith's position we may circumvent the authority of a ubiquitous human-centric chronos. And, by following the logic of Scheible's deconstruction of screenplays – with the main of the text set beside a routine industry procedure for signifying an extra-discursive – we fortuitously bump into the mechanics of the laugh track as system of archivation.

An Oralizing of the Laugh Track

As I plan to show, the laugh track is part of a larger story of the recorded laugh in the history of media, and telling that story can provide insights concerning the ways in which people have interacted with media technologies and in which bodies and voices have been represented through them. I argue below that the recorded laugh was a potent index of authentic

presence used to bridge the gap between recorded sound and listener. (Jacob Smith, "Frenzy of the Audible," 24)

In *Vocal Tracks*, beyond analysis specific to the recorded voice, Smith argues that the recording process, including recorded laughter, is a historical construct that can be explained by broader mechanisms for social order (that somewhat invisible but incontrovertible always present mediating frame). Throughout much of the book's opening chapter, which is solely devoted to recorded laughter, Smith establishes laughter in relation to the sociologist Erving Goffman's notion of the "frame." Goffman's idea is that we as social creatures are always conducting ourselves within set boundaries that involve, to some extent, our awareness of the regulatory terms of a given context for what is permissible in participating in a given social engagement. Smith writes,

> In Goffman's terms, Bergson's definition of laughter has to do with the social control of frame maintenance. When people are not flexible or fluid in their ability to adapt to the appropriate social frame, they are sanctioned by laughter. Laughter, then, is a kind of suture between the rigid and the flexible, the social and the individual, the mechanical and the human. The ability of a mechanical recording to break frames helps it to emanate a sense of authentic presence and humanity. (Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks*, 31).

Accordingly, *laughter* must be treated with much seriousness and purpose. As stated in the last chapter, Smith reckons the contemporary formation of recorded laughter to be a part of a

historical continuum that stems from helping early audiences relate to mechanical reproduction technology. The laugh track's general purpose is considered to be born of a need for comforting an audience. What is inspiring about Smith's work is that it opens up the research beyond the narrow estimations of a laugh track's impact or value for a broadcast production. It re-focuses accounts of the laugh track in terms of its material properties or qualities. We thereby glimpse the possibility of exploring the laugh track as other than a tool in a means/end calculus. Still, although being a technological invention is addressed, clearly, how the laugh track is its own kind of formation again is ignored. Rather than directing our research and analytical investments toward the laugh track's media specificity, Smith offers a greater narrative. It appears at least that, as with other accounts of the laugh track, we again subsume the recording as mediation and its technological and archival attributes as productive within a media studies episteme. However, the philosophical base that authorizes Smith's account of the laugh track extends the conversation beyond probing the implicit epistemological commitments of the previously referenced laugh track studies. It appears far more primordial and of existential import. If anything, Smith thrusts the discussion towards grander issues. Although the content production mechanisms within cultural history, discussed in Part One, may not authorize the laugh track as a media formation, it appears that the western logo-centric tradition does.

Drawing from the last quote, the laugh track does not just have a role in *suturing* one's encounter with a machine's outputting of a performance. Laughter also registers human bodily traits and "involuntary response mechanisms." These responses make acceptable, well independent of any technological media formation, certain social behaviours that lessen and loosen the affects of rule-governed along with formalized modes of presentation and social practice. Though Smith may not be entirely committed to Bergson's rather humourless

philosophical account of laughter as the elixir for inelastic behaviour, he largely conceives of laughter as an outlet for expressing what is suppressed by social regulations and what cannot be expressed by scripts that pre-scribe a player's given performance. Coming to presence through this plastic/inelastic binary, laughter is measured according to a metric of social order or, more accurately, for a social order being maintained. Beyond the narrow machinations of the early 20th century gramophone industry, laughter thus serves as a "true to life" and socially unregulated "gut-felt" response. For Smith's purposes, it reaffirms the presence of the sovereign-to-machine-essential-*human.* Considered within the greater workings of things, laughter thereby relieves the human-all-too-human anxiety that threatens the certitude of unification and authority necessary for the functioning of a society.

Though there is a consistent provisional tone to Smith's analysis, given that he recognizes our vocal performances are mediated by machines, he firmly attributes to the voice a power that registers independently of the mechanisms by which the voice is conveyed. In this sense, he offers an account of the human voice that, in general, resonates with language theorist Walter Ong's theory of orality which is predicated on a theoretical divide between *oral culture* and *literate culture.* Ong writes,

> Sound is more real or existential than other sense objects despite the fact that it is also more evanescent. Sound itself is related to present actuality rather than to past or future. It must emanate from a source here and now discernibly active, with the result that involvement with sound is involvement with the present, with here-and-now existence and activity. (Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 111)

and

> Spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation,
> which always engages the body'. (Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 67)

The human voice does not just parlay information or the contents of one's so-called "inner experience." The voice emits sounds that are *independent of* a symbolic or reasoned formulation. And just as Ong would have us believe, for Smith these sonic materials are nested within the complex fibres of, as experienced individually or collectively within a social order, *human being.*

Smith's premise for recorded laughter actually shares a structural parallel with Ong's notion of "secondary orality." For Ong, primary orality refers to verbal expression uncorrupted or prior to the graphic representation of language. Accordingly, secondary orality is: "essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print."[100] Likewise, Smith reads the laughter of recorded laughter as an oral expression of the Ongian first order. Laughter here is still a primary or even primitive-type of oral engagement. Though it is a contrivance of literate-derived technology, laughter's unscripted viscerality permeates the machine-mediated experience of the audience. Still, as I have indicated, Smith is less committed to foundational thinking or metaphysics than he is to the deployment of such. Two crucial things distinguish Smith's account of the human voice from Ong's transcendent theory. In one sense, though Smith *does* preserve a core distinction between the human voice and the media for transmitting it he *does not* extend Ong's mission to give primacy to the *oral* as real, transcendent and transhistorical. Conversely, disparaging the written and its various

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[100] See Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy*, 1982, p. 136.

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associated technological manifestations, as representative of the transitory, threatening or corrupting realm of the *artificial*. In another sense, Smith diminishes the perceived opposition between the oral and the written. He treats the two as being in a historically mutual and contingent relationship. They are intertwined as differing modes of human experience. For Smith, perhaps contrived, scripted, faked, mechanically generated etc., the laugh track survives as (among other vocalizing and media texts, given forces of 19th and 20th century racial typecasting and economic class division) a base communicative function. In short, he instrumentalizes the classical division of the oral and written in order to articulate the "expressive" role of a recorded performance for a social context. Audio recordings of extra-discursive vocalizing not only generate immersive approaches to sound reproduction research. They provide Smith with the pretense to exploit and even reconfigure general theories of language, technology, society and history to a humanist-oriented account of a medium's particular coming to presence.

A Sterne Warning to Mr. Smith

If Smith's analytic is just the strategic deployment of establishment philosophy's terms, then maybe his account of the laugh track as "part of a larger story of the recorded laugh in the history of media" does get us closer to the discrete workings of sound recording media than it may appear. Though not directly commenting on the concealment of audio production values, Smith describes recorded laughter, so that a performance does not appear divorced from the "here and now," as a procedure deployed to distract the audience from the main of the production. Laughter thus functions to cancel out whatever perceived foreign attributes a recording may have, including its deficiencies. It aids by immersing the listener/audience

uninterruptedly in their experience. Just as if it were a "live" happening or real and present performance. In this regard, we may consider Smith's work on the laugh track and other "wordless" vocalizing[101] as exposing the ideological and practical pursuit to achieve "true fidelity." As Jonathan Sterne tells us, from one generation of technician to another, within the history of sound recording, the pursuit of true fidelity appears to be a major driving force. For whatever commercial and industry use (i.e., film, TV, radio, music), a primary goal has been to devise recording methods that "close the gap" perceived between original and copy, or, more to the point, a produced/source sound and its recorded/reproduced version. Likewise Smith's analysis may be re-cast within one of Sterne's more potent observations. In *The Audible Past*, Sterne writes: "a set of procedures and aesthetics had to be developed to stand in for reality within the system of reproduced sound."[102] However, though it would appear that Smith's thesis on recorded laughter is retrievable within the recording ethos of "true fidelity," the seemingly provisional philosophical commitments guiding Smith's analytic are at odds with Sterne on this *ethos.* Sterne thinks the ideal to be entirely historically contingent, even fickle. And he certainly does not think it is the only ideal that has been pursued. More significantly, Sterne puts in question the basis for producing an account of history that foregrounds, even strategically, a sense of a continuum. Smith's work, to the contrary, requires a founding structural premise for interpreting the mechanicalizing of laughter or whatever wordless vocalizing. So, even though our activities and concepts are made-up, as social constructs they are a veiled referent to an authentic human interiority. Greatly influenced by Foucault, Sterne attempts to steer sound studies, at least those studies focused on the history of reproduced sound, away from the

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[101] For example, breathy deliveries, exclamations of anger are also what may be referred to as secondary sounds relative to speech and music.
[102] See Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past*, p.285.

metaphysical ideal of authenticity, fixed truths governing audition, or a disguised logo-centrism. In his analytic, notions of authenticity are contingent. They are predicated on the always in flux transformativity of recording machines. Thus, the so-called *real* of our cultural experience and practice is conditioned by machines as being amongst more machines. Sterne writes,

> This history of sound begins by positing sound, hearing, and listening as historical problems rather than as constants on which to build a history. So let us take a ride on Ockham's razor and work from a simpler definition of sound-reproduction, one that does not require us to posit a transcendental subject of hearing: modern technologies of sound-reproduction use devices called *transducers*, which turn sound into something else and that something else back into sound. My definition [presumably of sound-reproduction technology] is certainly reductive and incomplete, but it is a very instructive reduction. It offers us a useful starting point for a history of sound reproduction, especially for a history that will proceed analytically rather than chronologically. Even though transducers operate on a very simple set of physical principles, they are also cultural artifacts. This is where *The Audible Past* begins its history of sound. (Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past,* 22)

Focused on the history of sound reproduction apparatuses, Sterne approaches sounds studies independently of an opposition between the listening subject and sound technology.[103] He engages sound reproduction technologies by the measure of their own terms or, rather, what they do practically. Within sound studies, Sterne's medium-centred research represents a significant departure from commitments to sound as subject-centred historical phenomena. He circumvents the chronos-based thesis that projects an inherent human registry mechanism onto the operation and transformation of machines. Our focus shifts from sound technologies (inclusive of non-electronic or electrical instruments) *pro*ducing or *re*producing content to sound reproduction being a *trans*ductive process. Thus, proceeding analytically rather than chronologically, we attend to the conditions supporting the material transformation of sounds into other forms of sound. As we go forward in the next few chapters, taking a cue from Sterne, I extend the terms for analyzing and researching the specific re-productiveness of the laugh track. Sterne's conception of the sound technologies re-paves the bridge between Foucault's non-narrative archaeological process and the media archaeologist's technologically centred approach to media. In accord with the latter, I thus explore the particulars of the laugh track as a system of its functioning, as its own transformative process.

A Text-Based Analysis of Laugh Tracks

Whether engaged as a grand philosophical commitment or just a narrative strategy, within the trajectory of the western philosophical source-supplement quarrel, Smith, as pertains to accounts of the laugh track, is not alone. Jeff Scheible, in his article "Within, Aside, and Too Much: On Parentheticality Across Media," analyzes the laugh track in terms of how, within a

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[103] We note that *The Audible Past* (2003) was published prior to *Vocal Tracks* (2008).

script for a sitcom, it is transcribed as a parenthetical or bracketed element. Focusing on the laugh track by its particular arrangement or placement in a TV program's script, the laugh track is not only to be explored in terms of what is heard or performed, but by how it operates in the scripted arrangement of scene and dialogue. He deconstructs how typographic brackets and/or parentheses serve to underscore the divide between the dialogue being acted out by actors – the main of the action – and the superimposed pre-recorded audience laughter. In contrast to Jacob Smith's account of the laugh track as means for surmounting our anxiety over relating to machines, Scheible claims the bracketed laugh track indicates an uneasiness and anxiety around the need for aiding a script's meaning by use of *external* framing devices.[104] By this logic, in order to help transitioning within and between comedic scenes or routines, the laugh track supplements what is indeterminate or deficient about "the said" of a performance with a pre-recorded "unsaid."[105] For my purposes, Scheible is quite important for bringing attention to the inscriptive mechanical procedures that announce the presence of the laugh track as another formation, independent of the text (and of a particular model of cultural mediation). As with Smith, Scheible's work cues us to how the laugh track may be at play as a pure means. That is, the "bracketed" is not only, as Scheible reads it, a suspicious intervention. The bracketed-off instruction serves as index for the industry's system of labour. It is here that we may parse, and in turn potentially explore, the systems of effects (here the directed and/or mechanically generated laughter) from what they are supposed to effect. Alternatively, deploying an isolation metaphor, I have bracketed Part Two to indicate the laugh track's "structured absence" as a break from narrativo-philosophical mediation. Beyond how we may read into things by such investments the laugh track's structured absence materially looms, as a uselessness in reserve.

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[104] It appears Scheibel is making play of the Goffmanian frame.
[105] Or rather, might it be put, an "indeterminately said."

Scheible attends to the graphic textual representation and placement of the laugh track as written stage direction placed in brackets alongside the character dialogue for TV and radio scripts. Using Rose Kohn Goldsen's script breakdown of various TV programs ranging from stand-up comedy routines to variety shows to cartoons in her book *The Show and Tell Machine*, he draws out the laugh track's implicit separateness.[106]

> In other words, she [Goldsen] never writes, "(Guffaws.)" or "(Explosion of whoopers.)," only "(Laugh track.)." This writing of the laugh track seems to reflect how we imagine the track parenthetically – invariably, grammatically separate, an aside. (Jeff Scheible, "Within, Aside, and Too Much: On Parentheticality Across Media," 16)

Laughs for Goldsen are not partitioned off in terms of their variability and style of chortle (i.e. guffaws, explosions of whoopers). Instead she, with some variation, groups laughter that trails dialogue or action within parentheses. And, with unvarying repetition, she writes out the break or isolable element that gets interjected between actions and lines of dialogue as "(laugh track)." By another example of Goldsen's account we see:

> ... an animated creature is flattened by a steam roller (laugh track) or comes apart in a flurry or dismembered limbs (laugh track) which

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[106] Here, to state the obvious defence of Goldsen's (typo)graphic framing, I abruptly register that her "bracketing off" may also be considered as a pragmatic entry to prevent that "laugh track," read amidst lines of character dialogue, is not interpreted as yet another couple of words to be uttered along with the scripted dialogue. After all, the point of her analysis and description of the laugh track is to bring attention to the function the laugh track is assigned by TV producers attempting to determine how a program will likely be received. However, with that said, I think Scheibel's analysis could very well be on the "right track."

miraculously reassemble themselves into an intact body (laugh track).

(Rose Kohn Goldsen, *The Show and Tell Machine*, 67)

The laughter indicated by the entry "(laugh track)," be it in terms of the kind, volume or extent of laughter, lacks any individuation in quality. Rather, as Scheible points out, the simulated audience response of mixed-in laughter is graphically registered most systematically and economically as an element. Or, to use the functional language of Goldsen it is a "cue." "(Laugh track)" historically operates from outside what is of and proper to the "authentic" or intended engagement with the text. In other words, Goldsen simply refers to pre-recorded laughter as a generalized space or moment of sound that marks the beginnings and ends of gags. Her textual representation counter-poises the specificity of dialogue and action with a signifier for quantified presence of audience expression so-denoting a form-giving or framing device. Accordingly, Scheible reads these brackets (provocatively) as provocative:

> Goldsen's literal parentheses bring to mind a more figurative parentheticality that helps make sense both of the laugh track's sonic suturing into the rhythm of the sitcom and of its place in cultural consciousness more generally. The very sound of prerecorded laughter, coming from the position of the audience – structured into the soundtrack of the television program – interrupts, pauses, or displaces the principal flow of the program. But at the same time, its very interruption becomes integral to a show's flow, in a manner similar to the function of a parenthetical in a written sentence. (Jeff Scheible, "Within, Aside, and Too Much: On Parentheticality Across Media," 16)

Here, the laugh track has a troubled and troubling relationship with the scripted material. In certain respects it inhabits the main of the text as an unwanted but needed supplement (for maintaining "flow"). The laugh track reinforces the sense that the stand-alone studio-recorded performance lacks vitality and, without appropriately timed responses, may, tending towards *the* desultory, lose its cohesion. Thus the laugh track, while serving as the spontaneous and expressive dynamic stand-in for the non-present live audience, aids in contextualizing and giving a sense of completion to an action that is absent both in the script and in its being acted out. In effect, the laugh track is what Scheible, hinging his analysis off Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the role of parentheses in *writing*, refers to as a "structured absence." The laugh track is "the other" to the principal or featured work. Within this binary, the laugh track is not on equal footing with the "text proper." It is not only considered an add-on that is in service of the scripted production, over the history of radio and TV comedy, its necessity for the industry is plagued with the sense that it is an unfortunate supplement for what would otherwise ideally be present and 'real.'

Questioning Scheible's Analysis of Laugh Tracks

By Scheible's deconstruction of Goldsen's representation of the laugh track, we may read the very parenthetical framing of the laugh track as an indictment of the cultural and political authority in, for, and through a text's construction. Simply put, the laugh track is a peripheral device, a necessary evil that serves to maintain narrative coherence and presence. Again just like Smith, Scheible restricts our engagement to the laugh track as being an impure formation,

corrupted by whatever purpose or interest. He rationalizes the laugh track as a means to an end.

Still, given the use and role of laugh tracks as a "structured absence" (that is implicitly assigned

in relation to a live performed script) the following important questions may be raised: What are

the mechanisms by which we make a quantitative product of the seemingly qualitative emissions

of the body? Further, if these mechanisms are not discursively circumscribed are we to reject

Scheible's discursive presupposition or at least depart from it with a, shall we say, lesser-

committed discursive theorizing? To work towards addressing these questions, again Goldsen's

text may *itself* be of use.

By the very parenthetical gesture by which Goldsen and many others mark the laugh

track's appearance/absence, it may be argued, parentheses indicate the laugh track as a particular

institutional structuration.[107] The laugh track may be considered entirely distinct and independent

from the functioning of a broadcast studio production. No doubt, Goldsen's use of parentheses

assumes a kind of purposivity that binds the pre-recorded laughter to "the live" program it

accompanies. However, her bracketing may also simply indicate the nature of the type of

mechanisms that hold, house and contain the component parts. In other words, Goldsen may be

cuing the reader to the laugh track being a lesser-defined media formation, an *other* medium. It is

lesser-defined in that, by its very assemblage, proliferation, and murky status as an authenticating

effect, the laugh track is not only another piece of a studio's narrative. Apposite to Scheible's

read, I propose we take Goldsen's bracketing of the laugh track no differently than any other

supposed non-diegetic accompaniment. Here, the brackets indicate the politic of a division

between the creative-content producer and the technician. Or more broadly thought, between the

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[107] Of course this Part *Laughing ("Outside" the Box ...)* may be read very much as a particular
form of institutional structuration.

stage/studio designated "work of interest" and the facilitating technological apparatus and

appurtenances. In taking cues from Goldsen, as opposed to being circumscribed by a cultural

rationale, we may then directly explore how the laugh track is constituted. Though a part of

relaying the media of interest *vis a vis* a comedy routine, the laugh track may also be justifiably

explored as a medium of its own.[108]

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[108] I note that with a certain consistency appropriate to the theme of her book *The Show and Tell Machine* - as with a director's script-notes for stage/studio instructions, shot list, cinematography and lighting, camera directions, acting, etc. - Goldsen presents a TV program's elements as "cues." Accordingly, by her thematizing or more aptly re-(in)scribing, in the very language designated as technical shorthand for the TV industry, sequence of stage/studio commands into the analysis, alternative to Scheibel, we may read the main/creation of production so-marked by its relation to "mediated" laughter as our (the writers, the actors, the crew, the audience) *always already* being in a particular relation to and of "technology."

Chapter Eight: Digging into things with Media Archaeology

> Bodily experience is a product of the particular conditions of social life, not something that is given prior to it. Michel Foucault has shown that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the body became "an object and target of power." The modern body is the body that "is manipulated, shaped, trained," that "obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its forces." Like a machine, it is built and rebuilt, operationalized and modified."
>
> (Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 12)

In the previous chapter, Jonathan Sterne's notion of transduction was introduced as an alternative approach to studying sound reproduction technologies. In order to avoid "predetermin[ing] the history of sound reproduction" by the "positing of a transcendental subject of hearing"[109] Sterne attends to each sound technology as being unique transformative processes.[110] Whether it is for television, radio, the changes in the phonograph or certain digital sound technologies, he considers each invention to operate by historically specific "logics" and particular material realities that have come to constitute the specifics of each format of sound

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[109]See Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past*, p.21.
[110]Of course, he is mindful of the promiscuity at work in all cultural processes and discourses.

reproduction.[111] What I take to be instructive is his conception of history. That is, that history

"will proceed analytically rather than chronologically." Accordingly, we resist an inclination

towards a generalized vision of history governed by logics of progress and succession. Instead of

rationalizing the laugh track as being historical or part of a larger ongoing project, I then attend

to the transformative mechanisms of its system. In no way will this be to abstract a sound

reproduction technology from the "flow of the world." Rather, it is to contend with how a

cultural artifact may be integral to the material realities and detailed operations of a cultural

practice(s). As Sterne states, "the history of sound implies a history of the body." A history of the

body, as outlined in the quote above, lands us in a complex play of culturo-material processes.

These processes are in varying, often non-linear ways, along with our relation to and notions of

them as theorists, always in formation. Constructing a historical account by an ordered sequence

or progression from one event to the apparent next and onward after that really only reinforces a

way history is told. For Sterne, a history of sound reproduction technologies needs to be told by

identifying how the institutional forces, practices, discourses or disciplines, correlative

technologies are at work (or made past) in the creation of a particular technological invention.

In this chapter, I turn to media archaeology as method for proceeding analytically. I

attempt to explicate how it permits exploring media. Through media archaeology, we may

explore how media formations are artifacts emerging from distinct material and cultural

conditions. The laugh track is obviously a sound reproduction technology; however, as I have

contended, its transformation as a so-called effect is not only dictated by inventions in sound

technology particular to radio or television. Rather the laugh track is circumscribed by other

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[111]The "exteriority" of sound is this book's primary object of study. If sound in itself is variable rather than constant, then the history of sound is of necessity a contextual endeavor. Sound is thus an artifact, not a fact, of the messy and political human sphere.(Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past*, p.13)

seemingly non-sound based processes that make it into its own material *registry*, or, archive.

Appropriate to a contemporary analytic concerning the archive, I draw from the media archaeology of Wolfgang Ernst, and, to some extent Friedrich Kittler. By their approach, we may activate a micro-historical account of the transformative productive apparatus of recorded laughter that, while proceeding analytically, disrupts the plane(s) of narrativization for inherently making function and purpose of the laugh track. Alternatively, by pursuing the laugh track as an archive we stage reckoning with the laugh track as a particular mediatic instance of what Foucault refers to as a "system of its functioning."

Non-discursive Material Registries

> "Our writing materials contribute their part to our thinking." (Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, 196 quoting Friedrich Nietzsche's letter of February, 1882, in *Briefe*, IV: 97)[112]

Analyzing the laugh track by the regime of media archaeology represents both a methodological and philosophical enterprise centred on the none-too-apparent technological under-girding of contemporary mediatic formations. [113] On the one hand, the task is to, by applicable tenets of archaeology, describe the schemas and formats of media that impose a certain order on our world. And, on the other hand, to attempt to understand how media

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[112]I will refer to this quote in more detail in the Appendix with respect to laughter.
[113]It is arguable that the laugh track is always already cued and that this particular cueing is merely a quasi intervention or methodical illusion – a dreamt up rigorous mapping onto things.

formations make possible what we think and how we operate. Media is then not approached as if it were only a means to an end. Rather, media, through its varied operations, is what permits how we approach and perceive ends. With respect to the specific developments in 19th century approaches to historical documentation, Wolfgang Ernst prompts us to consider, "It is here that the crucial media-archaeological question arises again: does a discourse favor the development of new technologies, or is this new discourse itself an effect of such a shift in technology?" [114] As much as our discourses may be about things or the objects that comprise a particular topic they also *tell of themselves* as discourses, or the rules and terms of their formation. Further, discourses on media or how we talk about our technologically ordered world (past or present) are very much mediated by non-discursive formations. To further emphasize, media actually set the terms for what is permitted by the orderings of a discourse, by what may be innocently said and/or described. In the next chapter, for instance, when examining the laugh track during the years just prior to television, we see that it influenced how radio shows could be more efficiently and effectively formatted. The laugh track did not simply add tone and color to the content of a performance. It was a system of recording that shaped practices permitting new approaches to both address scheduling demands along with concealing program flaws. In other words, rather than as a discursive component of a script or show, its presence, in rather rudimentary ways, was impacting as a media formation.

In the quote heading this section, Friedrich Nietzsche declares that our thoughts are influenced and perhaps ordered by the technological limitations of our writing tools. This general observation greatly lends support for the media archaeologist's formulation – set in

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[114] See Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory*, 46.

contradistinction to Marshall McLuhan's[115] influential postulate that media are an extension of man – *man is an expression of media*. For the media archaeologist, by this perhaps facile inversion of McLuhan's famous dictum "man's" actions appear to be a mode of a technological engagement. The consequence of this is that since media are so integral to experience, one can never gain sufficient distance from which to study media as an independent observer. This really underscores the force of Foucault's descriptive methodology for the media archaeologist's exploring media. For instance, we have no grounds for asserting that the laugh track is a mere tool of a broader system. Certainly, it is a part of one. However, subsuming it within a cause/effect analysis ignores how the laugh track may be generative, not only of more laugh track but, of the very system it operates within. Along these lines for thwarting abstract formulations, media archaeologist Jussi Parikka asserts: "we do not so much have media as we are media and of media."[116] Media, by various processes of so-called inquiry and knowledge production, are then only further activated as methods of description and formulation that, in effect, generate more apparatus. Thereby, any system of knowledge is determined by discourses that are actually a by-product of the workings of technology. Even how we conceive of temporality, spatial relations, communication, culture, etc. are framed by technology's turnings. With respect to our relations with the past, Friedrich Kittler, considered a founder of media archaeology, here makes this point rather acutely:

> Once technological media guarantee the similarity of the dead to stored
>
> data by turning them into the latter's mechanical product, the boundaries

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[115]See Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media.*
[116] See Jussi Parikka's *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. (xxvii)

of the body, death and lust, leave the most indelible traces. (Friedrich

Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 55)

This excerpt follows from Kittler marking the divide between olden day recording methods

organized by abstracted idiosyncratic written reporting[117] and more modern-day media capable

of faithful standardized reproduction and storage (either acoustically or optically). Again, very

much like Foucault's challenge to the notion of *the author*, Kittler challenges any authority we

believe to have over our thoughts, creations, memories and even accounts of history. It is the

machinery that authorizes and "guarantees" how the past will survive. More specifically,[118] we

are confronted by material *registries* determining how and what we relate to as the past and

present. Kittler shows us how since the advent of 19th and 20th century, recording technologies of

(analogue and digital) "the boundaries of the body" are organized as knowable components

possessive of a legibility. This is a readability authored by operations of a standardized resource

retrieval system. For Kittler, it is not simply that the seemingly incorruptible proximity between

times now and before has been greatly lessened. More to the point, the very means for doing so,

an archivo-electro-mechanicality, engages the particulars of the past as mediality-specific

governed objects. The past is thus represented within an always-in-the-present matrix of

reproducibility (be it by a phonograph or by filming apparatus).[119] Accordingly, it is by a

materio-medialitic circuitry that we may come to understand, in terms of an epistemic order and

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[117] For paper and the book also possess a materiality and are mediums for conveyance (that is of conveyance/address).

[118] An analysis that's attributes are owed to the very machinery it engages the products of.

[119] See Wolfgang Ernst "Media Archaeography: Method and Machine versus History and Narrative of Media," *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*. Erkki Huhtamo, Jussi Parikka eds. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011, p.250 for the idea of the past as form of delayed presence.

the *always already* of the to-be-new(ly) produced, *the* contemporary cultural experience.[120] In the next chapter, in parallel with Kittler's claim that the developments in data storage foster new articulations of our relations with bodies and objects, I explore the laugh track as archival system that negotiates past vocal effusions as a mechanicalized future occurrence. Its stored assemblages of dissociated source-indeterminate laughter helped re-position affects of immediacy as products of an external time metric.[121]

A Media Archaeologist's Approach

In media-archaeological awareness, this recording [an early wax cylinder recording of any given song] primarily memorizes the noise of the wax cylinder itself – which is a different kind of "archive," not cultural-historical but cultural-technological, a different kind of information about the real. Media

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[120] Within the container-logic bounds of resource and capitalist industry *the* epistemic order is constantly under construction/determined as an atemporal temporal. Ultimately, Kittler's account of media stands in stark contrast with previous accounts that situate media analysis within the workings of the social. Still, just as crucial to his account, we need be mindful Kittler is not making timeless or universal claims. The process for making immediate our senses to our senses (optical, tactile and acoustic) is never final. It is to be pioneered and invigorated yet again through restructurings and diversifications of the olden-time institutions for safeguarding and storing artefacts. As it has come to pass, the capacity and capability of modern archival storage and retrieval systems more than "guarantee the similarity of the dead to stored data." They are the active mechanisms by which occurs an ongoing authorizing of sameness and difference.

[121] In due course, regardless of these transformations, it was the calculated nature of mechanicalized laughter that drew considerable opposition from those within the broadcast industry. Believing the integrity of realist representation may be compromised.

archaeology opens our ears to listen to this as well, not to filter it out (as opposed to the "cocktail party effect" of hermeneuticized psychoacoustics).

(Wolfgang Ernst, "Media Archaeography," 250)

Here, Ernst identifies the media object – a wax pressing from yesteryear – as an "archive." It houses a memory available for not only formulating historical accounts of our culture, but of our culture's technological past. Placing the archive in quotes, he elaborates on its divergent interpretation. The recording is "a different kind of archive" from the traditional archive in that as technologically contrived memory, this medium possesses certain attributes that, apart from the conveyance of information (e.g. a message in song form), organize our experience and/or "information about the real." Effectively, like Kittler, departing from an interest to comb media for content in order to construct a story of things, Ernst seeks to explore the very technological conditions (its terms and rules) for content coming into being. As such, he proceeds analytically instead of chronologically. He deploys the archaeological method for avoiding a human-biased narrative. Further, Ernst develops upon Kittler's observations concerning how data storage systems mediate our experience with the past. Very focused on a medium's attributes he initiates a more detailed engagement with, by their different modes of quantification, the rules particular to these kinds of systems. We shall see more evidence of this engagement in chapters ten and eleven. There I examine how Ernst brings focus to contemporary databases being discrete and dynamic temporal media formations. I contend that his account of media formations being auto-generative presupposes a broader universally applicable system of inheritance. As if conceived from within a technological gene pool, each medium derives and carries forth its generative

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capacity due to precedent form-determining forces. For now at least, we grasp that archives take

different forms and they do not just store and register materials.[122] Considered from this

perspective, media memory has the potential to be entirely recast. The archive *itself*, rather than

serving an historical interest to aid our memories instead is to then be approached, independent

of human subjectivity and universal temporal frameworks for story-telling, as distinct sets of

rules and practices for data storage. Likewise, in the next chapter, I examine regulatory

mechanisms that authorize and organize the laugh track as an archival formation. These

mechanisms show in terms of decisions and practices that, often without forethought, simply

maintain regimens of production.

The actual memory the archive has is then not thought in terms of what it contains, but in

terms of what it does by its appropriative mechanisms for maintaining information as "data." In

other words, the archive's particular processes need to be examined for how they execute

storage. Thus the media archaeologist focuses on the conditions for, or how it is, that media

formations come to sort, order and calculate as they do.[123] Ernst writes,

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[122]We see this for instance (see last quote) with his rejection of "hermeneuticized
psychoacoustics." Against interpretive or ideative-driven versions of things, Ernst thus
proclaims: "the media-archaeological approach is in fact about the unrevealing of symbols,
signals, and information." By the "unrevealing of symbols etc," Ernst does not contend that the
apparatus is overlooked or (made) hidden, as if it is its own hermeneutic horizon of presence (as
truth), from the researcher. Rather, the media archaeologist explores what symbols, signals, and
information, given their cultural orientation, in fact, do not reveal. See Wolfgang Ernst's Digital
Memory, p.27.
[123]According to Ernst, these conditions often entail encountering media by or in step with certain
discursive orderings of physics and mathematics. In this respect, our analyses are organized by
various processes of mechanization and the past discursive grounding and framings of and by the
"technological." Our concepts, we may surmise, are quantumized in various ways for permitting
a system's calculability, control, form, rate and degree of expenditure. With the example of the

> The archaeological gaze ("theory," in the ancient sense of insight) is such
>
> a way of looking at media objects: enumerative rather than narrative,
>
> descriptive rather than discursive, infrastructural rather than sociological,
>
> taking numbers into account instead of just letters and images. (Wolfgang
>
> Ernst, 251)

And in being concerned with a medium's generativity, we not only focus on its potency of

replication but also attend to a medium's dynamism and possibility for transformation.[124]

As we shall explore in Part Three, the systems that are identifiable as shaping our

perceptions and engagements with the past are processes of invention that, while creating a

mediated relation with the past, also do so at the expense of the past. In other words, we only get

a version of what may have been. In this respect, we return to Siegfried Zielinski's previously

outlined opposition in chapter five to the media archaeologist's narrow conception of the archive.

Through Zielinski, we shall explore how the archive is not only the site for a program of

investigation predicated on positive display. If it were so, this would be to delimit our

engagement with the history of a medium to a discourse solely determined by calculation and

formula. So, apart from the more immediate interest to engage the laugh track media formation

by an archaeological method, I will come to assert that the laugh track among other media

formations is not reducible to a predictive schedule of outcomes. Along with Zielinski, I

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early wax cylinder recording, concepts of sound reproduction and production, given its capacity
for replacing or representing the real, come into play.

[124] In effect, Ernst attunes his analysis and lexical reserve to the rules that permit a formation by
always asking: How it is that certain discourses formed for determining a technological
medium's materio-physical limits? This puts in practice Marshall McLuhan's dictum "the
content of one medium is always another medium" (see Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film,
Typewriter*, p.12).

recognize that the archive also conceals the possibility of temporal regimes being inaccessible and defying quantifiability. To my mind, this is not a rejection of the archive. Rather it is an attempt to expand our notion of what the archive is (of what is put in reserve). That is, the archive shows in terms of what it may not hold and that there are kinds of temporal structurations it cannot register and retain. In this respect, we may approach technological formations such that quantification and the realm of predictive logics are of no use. And it is precisely in this way that I conceive of the laugh track as uselessness in reserve. As an archival formation at a distance from a discourse that subsumes a medium's history under the quantificatory regimes of a technological condition. How we understand the laugh track as an instance of materio-medialitic circuitry is then recast. Of course, this does not mean the laugh track is outside a "technological condition." Rather, that it may show its mediatic operations through a regulatory that departs from the calculus of its production. However, prior to any sustained challenge to media archaeology's determinations regarding the archive we need to first contend with its methodological import for my exploration of the laugh track. After all, in the next chapter, media archaeology is instrumental for, in a limited sense, clarifying the laugh track's quantificatory nature as an archival system.

Chapter Nine: Mechanisms of Recycling

In chapter one I posed the question: *What is the laugh track*? This was volleyed in response to the standard definition and analyses that subsume the laugh track within a broader theory of culture. For Inger–Lise Kalviknes Bore, Brett Mills etc. the laugh track simply is a device. It is a technological item that is generically conceived as a "function" serving the transmission of comedic information. In chapter seven we see Jacob Smith and Jeff Scheible, by entirely divergent approaches from one another, also read purpose into the laugh track. Still, I use their analyses as entry for exploring the laugh track as an industrialized system of production. They help in taking it from being declared a function to grappling with certain details of how it may be constituted as a practice. However, like Kalviknes Bore' and Mill's analyses, for Smith and Scheible the laugh track, either as technological suture or textual cover-up, is abstracted from its material production. In contrast to all these approaches, I have set out to gain insight into the constitution of the laugh track as media formation that is independent of possible purposes for laughter. I have proposed that the laugh track be explored as a machinic operation that perversely archives. In this chapter I will describe how the laugh track shows as its own archival media formation. Apart from it being a perverse archive, a uselessness in reserve, I, for now, limit examining the laugh track in terms of the rules and conditions that both directly and indirectly register its being a particular system of archivation.

Further to my rejection of various accounts of the laugh track, over the course of the previous eight chapters I have attempted to sever analysis of the laugh track from an inherent human-centred registry. I have sought out alternative approaches to media that resist being filtered through cultural history. Appropriate to my exploration of the laugh track, I contend the media

archaeologist examines the rules and conditions that permit the emergence and continued generativity of a media formation. It is through media archaeology that we may drill down into the reserve of technological inventive practices. Thereby, we may attend to the regulatory mechanisms governing a medium's formations. In particular, we may examine the laugh track assemblages as temporal configurations, storage mechanisms and calculations for forms of visceral effusion. Although I have dissociated my analysis from a human-centred premise, still the constitution of the laugh track shows in relation to non-technological regulatory formations and human activities. Thus, we bump up against the laugh track's auto-generativity in relation to various regimes that have worked alongside it. Specifically, I explore the relevant mechanisms furthering broadcast industry productivity and the various discursive frameworks – linguistic and political – amidst which the laugh track emerges as its own archival system.

Broadcast Industry Terms

Effects of Language:

By the expression "laugh track" we automatically invoke industry technical terms relating to the effect's type of equipment and its being a studio production. Even the word "track," independent of "laughter," suggests its cinematic beginnings as technical convention. It infers the referent as an isolable audio recording. Although "track" well pre-dates cinema, within the discussion of 20th century and contemporary media, "track" entails physically positioning a material carrier of sound, as a distinct or separate process of production and reproduction,

relative to the moving image it may possibly accompany.[125] With respect to the "laugh track,"

we typically refer to the recorded "sound(s) of laughter" as a particular category of effect and as

an object of technical production. Herein, the countable noun "laugh" of "laugh track" designates

studio performance-directed responses of laughter that have been recorded either digitally or on

magnetic tape.

Particular to the laugh track, as a track of sound compared to the uncountable noun forms

"laughter," "laughs" or "laughing," is a grammatical distinction suggested by the noun "laugh."

In surveying the various literature and references to canned laughter,[126] it is only on very rare

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[125] We may suppose "laugh track" would then appear as industry short-hand for "a laugh soundtrack" but given the readily known auditive character of laughter calling it this may feel uneconomical and redundant.

[126] Continuing on this track of analyzing terms, we see broadcast industry expressions like "canned," "sweetening" or even "de-sweetening" refer to either the form of production or the effect that simulates and/or augments the reaction of a live audience when mixed with laughter. (Specific to the audio-mixing trade, the process of "sweetening" and/or "de-sweetening" refers to an audio technician's often post-performance manipulation of a live audience's responses. These terms, "sweetening" and "de-sweetening," are twofold. In one sense, they describe both the blended effect that a laugh track may have for the reception of a recorded performance. In another sense, "sweetening" and "de-sweetening" represent the actual hands-on mixing process of performance with audience audio whereby the audio technician adds to or subtracts from a present audience's "live" reaction. Beyond providing an audience stand-in, in the form of a single track of composed laughter, the technician manipulates the live studio audience response by introducing other pre-recorded voices. Akin to mixing various spices for a cooking recipe, he thereby seeks to enhance a live-studio performance's response.). The term "canned," implicitly counter-poised with "live," refers to audio such as music, crowd noise or laughter that is prepared in advance of the events or performances with which they are spliced. "Canned" connotes a generic quality. (Though it is understood that the notion of "canned" signifies a generic status to the laughter assembled (as the specificity of the tracks as tracks pre-disposes the laugh track to being a TV and radio enhancing broadcast phenomena) we should not discount that the (recorded) laughter that occurs within the diegesis of a TV, radio and too cinema is of a canned, highly scripted and generic order. Though the suggestion that studio or stage-performed laughter be placed in the same category as an assembly of past audience responses may raise the ire of the actors, directors and production managers there is little doubt that regardless of being diegetic or not guffaws recorded onscreen also comprise a laugh track.) It conveys the typical form or standard for a broadcast-produced component, which in turn may be used in varying contexts and can have vast distribution amongst broadcast productions worldwide. "Canned,"

occasions that laugh tracks have been referred to as "laughter" tracks.[127] The common term found in North American dictionary definitions and glossary of terms for various broadcast related texts show "laugh" not "laughter" as the preferred noun form. Perhaps by naming his audience response machine the *Laff Box,* the sound technician Charley Douglass had considerable impact on the predominance of the institutionalized coinage "laugh track."[128] Still, on this track of conventions and designation, though often composed of a mix of multiple recorded tracks of laughter (laughs or laughing) the final studio recording, very much like any audio mix-down, is referred to as a single track, a laugh track. Though conceivable, the laugh track for studio productions (from my research at least) is never a recording of one lone laugh. We do not encounter it as a singly isolable and even potentially extended mono-syllabic guffaw (chortle or chuckle) nor, by contrast, an inimitable or distinct execution of laughing (as in: "you sir, have a unique laugh"). Isolating a laugh in this respect, would likely transform the production mechanism *laugh track* into a display. Rather, a *laugh track* is by convention considered to be a

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which carries the stigma of pejorative expressions such as "inauthentic," "stock," "hackneyed," and "trite" registers a regime of production specific to laughter, that is in direct contrast with signature sounds that are considered unto themselves. Signature laughs are often character specific and distinct in kind, such as the inimitable laughs of: *Woody Woodpecker*; *Bosshog*, *Beavis and Butthead*; *Spongebob*; and, from cinema-lore, the Wicked Witch of the West's cackle. Though "canned laughter" may simulate the supposed spontaneous and immediate reactions of an audience (chortling, giggling, guffawing at/during/in the instant of experiencing or being effected by a comic routine) this pre-recorded accompaniment *apparently* lacks any temporal and material connection to the source of humor to which it ultimately gets associated.

[127] In *Extras,* "Patrick Stewart" episode 6 of Season 1 (2005), Ricky Gervais, somewhat derisively referring to the laugh track as a BBC 1 sanitized production trait, calls it as a "laughter track." Again in season 2, episode 4 (2006) another character (at a BAFTA awards ceremony) also calls it as laughter track. Obviously outside of North America terms of reference vary.
[128] One can only speculate, if, in the patent dispute with Jess Oppenheimer, the out-come that the Jayo-Laugher became the industry standard that *the effect* would be cast by what it does as a commercially branded form. Within the history of naming effects, there is no decisive grammatical form that *effects'* names are given. – They are variable. Consequently, the naming of the "laugh track," rather than in keeping with a lexical convention of an industry, appears as a term peculiar to the crafting of particular sound mixers.

singular recording, or at least unified presentation[129], of a plurality or multitude of laugh-types and laugh-sounds.[130]

Stepping back, the laugh track, it would seem, emerged within an industry apparatus complete with its own lexicon. Its discursive machinery almost instantly reduces the laugh track to an effect or, instead, to being within a category of effects. Simply being within a category of effects entails the laugh track meet the demands for maintaining the illusions of its artifice. That is, other than in terms of its implicit instrumentality for facilitating simulation the technological must be seemingly absent. Generally speaking, effects are techniques that, as mediating tools, conceal their effecting action. Disentangling the laugh track from the modes of industry requires *suppressing* the effects of a deeply rooted terminological framework for formalizing a division of labour further parsed by established skills and duties. Daunting as that seems, for my limited purposes, I look to investigate the orderings and elements of the materio-technological category that gets presupposed in the expression "laugh track." Accordingly, the object here, in getting clear on the particulars of what gets presupposed, is to explore the presence or tangible modes of the laugh track as archival formation both within and apart from industry.

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[129] In the making of a laugh track the various tracks comprising such need not be mastered to one track.

[130] By contrast, calling this form of sound production "a laughter track" would both involve violating standard rules of grammar and at once impart noun-wise a category of sound and verb-wise a category of behavioral activity. As a countable noun, "laugh" also stands in as a known and naturalized referent to a type of sound that has particular technical properties that, as stated above, blend in with other materially gathered elements of a production. Not to mention, being a placeholder for an index of group/audience reception. Even so, the laughter of laugh tracks is never just a recorded string of laughs. It is the assemblage of unitized (for giving a regulatable divisibility) quantified sound-bits. Either machine-spliced or digitally laced together they are put together as formulations governed by industry standard decibel and timbre ratios.

Bing Crosby and the Laugh Track

Techniques and Equations:

The first known instances from which laugh tracks were devised actually come from when recorded laughter *itself* became an object of fascination to radio programme producers. Prior to 1949, laughter was, among other auditory gestures such as clapping and cheering, an indicator of the live studio audience. However, during an off-colour routine at ABC Studios in Hollywood, the studio audience's overly-exuberant response changed that.[131] Though the stage material broke with community standards and could not be broadcast, producers saw potential in the accompanying and, in this particular instance, "stand-alone" recorded laughter. This put in motion the specific extraction and salvaging procedures that shortly thereafter led directly to the invention of the abovementioned Laff Box. The obvious pragmatic gain for the broadcast industry's switch to a system of pre-recorded laughter was that instead of relying on the pell-mell regulatory regime of cue cards for prompting an audience to "laugh" or "cheer" or "applaud," pre-recorded laugh tracks enabled TV and radio producers to place audience response under their discretion and control. Thereby, pre-recorded laugh tracks could be better regulated for conveying what was imagined by studio producers as the appropriate audience auditory reaction or immediate visceral reception of a comedic action or routine. Most mechanically, in a chain reaction, the recorded laughter would then trigger a response of the like in the broadcast audience. With that said, on the face of things, extraction and salvaging appear as the primary acts for mechanically manufacturing laughter. That is, for making laughter into a stored, manipulable and isolated response. However, editing and saving techniques only reinforce the

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[131] Show number 93, broadcast February 16, 1949. See Lionel Pairpoint's *Bing Crosby's Philco Radio Time,* 2000.

laugh track as a form of reserve. In one sense, the actual materials salvaged contain a registry of attributes. They are their own reserve of qualities that precede the technical procedures for mechanical assembly and ordering. In effect, the recorded laughs come to the sound engineer as spent and tested production mechanisms. They are pre-packaged quanta of effusion. The Laff Box, for example, is a reserve constituted by its collection of pre-calibrated (thus already reserved) equations of culture's viscera. In another sense, in terms of an archival formation, the famed laugh track machine, though its retrieval techniques are productive in configuring more group laughs, is already destined to be reproductive. It is unlike the classical archive that preserves the discrete and unique particulars of an entity's fonds. Thus, the laugh machine is only crudely understood if thought as system-host to precedent assembly mechanisms. Rather, the always-transforming laugh-track-producing machine maintains its own uniqueness by actually making laughter, whether grouped or individuated, generic. That is, it is always the remaking of laughter as reproducible yet again. In other words, it inexhaustibly replicates the exhausted in the making of its registry of exhaustion. To further bolster this point, over the coming chapters I will examine how, as its own archival system, the laugh machine receives its authority from pre-cedent and ongoing regimes of imitation.

Although mechanical ingenuity may have been largely attributable to technicians, the broadcast industry's "creative" types had a significant impact on advancing the laugh track. As noted by many radio and TV historians, famous American singer and actor Harry Lillis "Bing" Crosby was instrumental for his monetary investments and innovations in broadcast production techniques. He prompted the transition from recording on electrical transcription discs to the more edit-friendly reel-to-reel tape recording technology. Crosby recognized the potential of tape

recording as a time-saving measure. Exploiting the early Magnetophon tape machine's editing capabilities, he limited each of his studio performances to "one-offs." Accordingly, without the demands of a repeat performance, a show's recording was then re-broadcast, in the designated evening timeslots, to audiences in other time-zones. Specific to the development of the laugh track, here framed within the temporal economy of radio broadcast scheduling, Crosby was the first to put the laugh track to use as "audio-fill." It stood in for lost time generated from those segments of a performance in which there were miscues that needed to be edited out. The laughs ensured a full thirty minutes of air time was met. So, although laughter simulated the "live" response Crosby felt appropriate for his gags, it also served a pragmatic function. Certainly, the laugh track contributed to a show's overall entertainment affect, however, it may be examined for its significance as an auditory cover-up. In a certain respect, like *M*A*S*H*'s producer Larry Gelbart a few decades later, Crosby considers the laugh track as its own media formation. To solve an industry generated timing problem it was dealt with, in the form of a quantized extra-discursive grammar of vocal punctuations, as a reserve of timing mechanisms. As much as it could be deployed for its content the laugh track was thus put in play for the particular measurable attributes of its objectness. Here, Crosby was thinking about media not only for what it is designed to do but for its generative capabilities. The laugh track was something other than a resource of laughs. However, though having some kinship with my exploration of the laugh track Crosby maintains the means/end proposition. The laugh track slug simply liberated Crosby's programs from the constraints and program failings (often actor's gaffs) of a live performance while preserving its liveliness.

Laugh Machine as Archival Unit:

Within the history of the broadcast industry, the laugh track has stood as its own, though officially unaccredited, domain of production.[132] Generally considered, the laugh track may be readily distinguished from other audio effects by its function as a particular form of response, that of laughter, to a broadcast studio performance. Initially, as noted, recorded laughter was technically inseparable from a studio broadcast performance's audio. It was sound emanating from a studio performance-present "live audience" that could not be isolated from the recording of the performance (toward which the audience's responses were directed). Developments and innovations in sound technologies gave audio engineers the tools for isolating and (re)assembling pre-recorded laughter. [133] The first audience response machines were known as the affable-sounding "Jayo Laugher"[134] and by, what became the industry standard in the early 1950s, the "Laff Box."[135]

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[132] Unlike the famed Wilhelm scream, drum roll, punch-line drum punctuator.

[133] Along with laughter other heard responses such as booing, cheering and applause are also pre-recorded. Often these audience sounds are grouped together as crowd noise or, as in some applications of what's called, "canned heat." "Canned heat" may be understood as a variation on the laugh track with its mocking toned laughter amidst choruses of cheering and booing sounds that are used to augment and at times sway a live audience's response at television program recordings like those of the *World Wrestling Entertainment*. However, unlike laughter which is classified as its own individuated type of response, these elements of crowd reactions, within the institution of TV and radio broadcast production, have not yet been given their own category. At any rate, as its own category as an audio track distinct from other tracks of sound the laugh track is considered as separate from the source of laughter. We, as viewers of a TV broadcast, do not see the audience from which the laughter derives and further, presumably at least, the accompanying laughter is not elicited at the very instance of what gets performed.

[134] The Jayo Laugher was invented by Jess Oppenheimer (also of CBS). He put it into service in the famous TV show *I Love Lucy*, of which he created and produced.

[135] An invention (some say intervention) by CBS sound engineer Charley Douglass.

Below we see the "Laff Box."[136] Invented by CBS sound engineer Charley Douglass, it was approximately ten times the size of its squat competitor, the six-buttoned box console Jayo Laugher.[137] The Laff Box's cabinetry, when its doors are open, reveals an elongated typewriter comprised of thirty-two keys along with an organ-like foot-pedal that are connected (through a system of interchangeable spools activated by (key triggered) rod and pulley) up to lengths of audiotape which contain over three hundred and twenty pre-recorded laughs (ten separate laughs on each of the thirty-two tape-loops). The individuated laughs, with tape locations quickly sourced by aid from an accompanying written registry of descriptions, provided the Laff Box player/technician with what ostensibly was an infinite number of combinations for generating a

requisite pre-recorded laugh track.[138]

Fig. 1

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[136] In the history of popular(ized) mechanical and electronic devices, "box" serves as a curious expression and marketing designate, both as ordinary object and as a container for concealing a machine's (mysterious) operations. To note a few: jukebox, music box, black box, *jack-in-the-box*, *x box* and the slang referent for TV, idiot box.

[137] See Appendix for visual comparison. Oppenheimer was also an inventor. He held several patents covering a variety of devices, notably including the in-the-lens "teleprompter."

[138] Much of my description of Charley Douglass' Laff Box is borrowed from Rose Kohn Goldsen on p.69 of *The Show and Tell Machine.*

The laugh track is conceived as any other broadcast or carnival stunt-routine. Not to be too tangential, but for its time, it was an industry trope in form of a hypnotic mechanicalized echo or, if you prefer, as a mechanicalized hypnotic echo. In effect, the laugh machine acted out the broadcast industry dream of being an optimal magic-maker. The duplicate is not only a remedy to the inevitable failings of any system of preservation. The backup is transformed to a reserve of production that remembers the raw materials (to be nuanced and refined) and takes the studio out of harm's ways. The magic of the mechanism is done in a keystroke that both remembers what it constitutes and, by being a faux rendition that is a faux archive, forgets that it does so.

In its early assembly, "canned laughter" was spliced together on quarter inch audiotape glued to a large wooden wheel. Now of course, these pre-recorded tracks are constructed digitally and conveyed by electronic platforms ranging from computer software, such as CD-ROM disks and hard-drives, of varying kinds with varying memory capacity. Still, whether on tape, disk or hard-drive, the pre-recorded assemblage of laughter exists as its own element of audio ready to be coupled with or mixed into other audio and video tracks. As such, the terms "canned laughter" and "laugh track" indicate the potential future relation or role of audio material/information to other audio and video tracks. As with Rose Kohn Goldsen's previously cited observations, we are made to understand that each track of "canned laughter" is an electromagnetic layering of very brief instances of pre-recorded laughs. These laughs are gathered from the recordings of previous laughter that were directed towards other performances and that emanated from a whole host of unknown, or at least unacknowledged, audience members that may or may not still be alive. Her observations extend thinking the laugh track beyond its status as effect. For Goldsen we may suspect it is a self-sustaining medium fostering communion from beyond the grave. Though I do not pursue a spiritist analytic, the archival

nature of the laugh track certainly flummoxes examining it only in terms of quantificatory processes. In Part Three, I explore the laugh track as an archival system that defies the narrow calculus of its particular invention as a sound and storage technology. With that said, for now at least, we understand the laugh track signals the coming configurations of pre-recorded laughter as a recorded assemblage (on a spool of electromagnetic tape, a compact disc, computer hard-drive, etc.). The laugh track is always already an (system) archivated process. In this respect, the production of physically distinct laughter encoded rolls, discs and hard-drives bare the traces (tracks and traits) of canned laughter organized and generated by machines dating back to the late 1940s. Though emerging in relation to the broadcast industry's division of labor afforded by a techno-material order of isolating part from whole and re-temporalizing the supposed lived, it is a formation that is more than a generalized storage system. Still, for the coming chapters I have plenty to answer to. Mostly: how is the laugh track a perverse archivated process?

Serious Business and Politics of Laughter

Laugh Track as Suspect Simulacra:

Producers feel the canned laughter is more real than "unsweetened" laughter. "Real audiences sound phonier than the laugh track." "They freeze up and act unnatural." "Live audiences in from the street are tense and nervous." At times the live audiences yock it up *too* much." "Audiences just never laugh or respond on cue, they do the strangest things."

Laugh tracks, pretty much from their inception in television broadcasting, have received

mixed reviews. Contrary to the above quoted passage, the sentiment concerning their value was

not unanimous. In fact, as previously outlined, regardless of the laugh track's effectiveness at

audience response simulation, many in the TV broadcast industry, at various points in its history,

have considered the laugh track an unnecessary technical intervention. Today, that sentiment

appears to have become the norm. In most TV sitcoms that have been produced since the early

2000s, the laugh track is absent[139] and there is often much promotion and press about this

absence.[140] Of course, that sentiment is encouraged by other developments. With multiple

retakes of studio performance, improved production values, advertisements etc., its pragmatic

gain as time filler for early radio lost relevance. Instead, it became considered an intrusive

mechanism that did not disguise the failings of artifice. It brought attention to artifice. That is,

the laugh track was considered a reserve of artificially imposed, industry contrived tropes. It was

thought to be a generic adornment added to the fixtures of "truer to life" performance.

Accordingly, the laugh track did not serve to keep seamless the flow of the broadcast hour.

Instead the laugh track dated its shows. It helped put a production in the past. Its basic inherent

archivality (recorded old laughs repeatedly recycled) was simply a brutish presence. Unlike

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[139] Even though in popular shows like *The Simpsons* and *Arrested Development* where there is no laugh track that the laugh track is entirely absent is another matter. It is arguable that the timing or pacing of line delivery or transitioning from act of physical humor to another is influenced by several decades of laugh track accompaniment to comparable gags.

[140] Commenting on the mixed reception for this mediative supplement, sound and performance studies scholar Jacob Smith writes, "the laugh has been presented as the ultimate expression of the human, and its mechanical reproduction serves as a lightning rod for anxieties concerning authenticity and the social dimensions of mass media consumption." See Jacob Smith's "Frenzy of the Audible," *Television New Media,* (February 2005 vol. 6 no. 1), p.23.

Crosby's attempts to tap the laugh track's generative capacity, the laugh track was seen as degenerative. The laugh track threatened to put the immediacy of the work with which it was synced in a state of storage.[141]

Laugh Track as Tool of Commerce:

One of the most famous instances highlighting the tension concerning the use of laugh tracks is the well-publicized quarrel between directors of the enormously popular American television series *M*A*S*H* and the producers of the series. One may recall the serious tenor of the program's storyline. Set within the 1950s Korean War, it followed the daily challenges facing a "crack team" of doctors deployed in the heart of enemy territory. However, although the actual social and political context for *M*A*S*H* had much gravitas for the American public – it was considered an allegory for American military involvement in the then ongoing Vietnam War – it was not strictly a drama. The script was peppered with comedic lines and antics delivered by an assortment of often liquored-up "odd-ball" characters. Regardless, its production team, the industry, and critics, considered the series a watershed moment for TV. Topics pertaining to an array of political issues – be they related to identity, sexuality, ethnicity, one's religious beliefs, or most things of a public nature – were fair game to explore. At any rate, much like his artistic/content-creator brethren within the industry, *M*A*S*H*'s creator and writer Larry Gelbart faced considerable pressure from the program's producers to deploy a laugh track. Gelbart was clearly opposed to using them on *M*A*S*H*, but, TV executives, citing their impact on test

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[141] And this is the *frame of hypostatization* by which theorists Kalviknes Bore, Mills et al. assess the laugh track's value as function or the potency of it liveness. The terms for conceiving the laugh track are not simply cultural they are ontological. The *being of the laugh track* carries with it the traits of inauthenticity.

audiences, deemed them necessary for maintaining high ratings.[142] Ratings aside, Gelbart felt his

creation was cheapened:

> Our most notable loss was on the matter of the laugh track. CBS would
>
> never let us do away with it no matter what other compromises they were
>
> willing to make. So there it is, on almost every episode, a recording of
>
> people guffawing at material they never heard, a good many of them long
>
> dead. The only thing I ever learned from the track was that while I can't be
>
> sure of life, we all have a chance at a laugh after death. (*Gelbart Papers*,
>
> Online Archive of California, Box 36, Folder 5, 2)

The gravity of the subject matter and experience of 20th century warfare was trivialized. The

reputation of the laugh track was thus aligned with ways for sanitizing both art and social

commentary. As a vacant gesture cobbled together from a cluster of voices of those well-

disconnected,[143] even by death, laugh tracks' reinforced commercialized entertainment

objectives. Within popular culture lore or at least an industry-manufactured controversy, the

laugh track represented "the alien" or intruder. More practically, within public discourse it

became a weapon, an ideological grenade to be lobbed, at a money-hungry establishment, on

behalf of factions advocating freedom of expression and artistic integrity.[144] However, upon

another read, the affects of Gelbart's rejection may be tempered. His claims against the laugh

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[142] See Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* New York: Pantheon Books, 1983, p. 33

[143] The perplexing sense of disconnection often came from the location of the on-screen action
(for instance, a remote mountain region) being nowhere that would conceivably host a theatrical
audience.

[144] In the end, after years of challenges from *M*A*S*H*'s creators CBS producers, perhaps as
promotional ploy to increase ratings, finally relented some. The laugh track was present in all
scenes except for those taking place within the confines of the operating tent wherein occurred
surgery, suffering, grappling with existence and death.

track indicate more than a rhetorical ploy. In the above quote, Gelbart registers the laugh track as reserve. It keeps alive the possibility of laughing in a future well after one is dead. The laugh track's crime is that it has already condemned a sense of what is present and vital to a past that is preserved for times yet to come. For the producers of *M*A*S*H*, it was not that laughter was inappropriate so much as it was, by an external mediating agent of time, removed from the immediacy of production. Gelbart's assertion represents an instance in which the laugh track gets conceived as an archivo-mechanical formation. Laughs are temporalized through an immortalizing mechanism. We thus reconnect with the observation of early voice (re)-production technologies discussed in chapter six. We recall the operations of a sound emitting apparatus were independent of the human arbiter. In this respect, we encounter the laugh track as a temporo-quantificatory recipe for making a permanent record. Moreover, in bumping head on with the laugh track's medialitic circuitry we move the discussion towards the kinds of assessments of the temporal mechanics on which Ernst predicates his version of media archaeology and, conversely by which Zielinski expands the analytic. In the coming chapters, we shall pursue the surface/depth time problematic that plagues how we may account for quantificatory mediatic regimes.
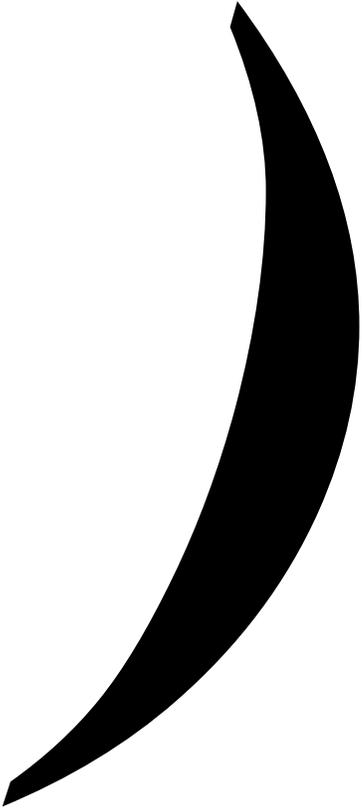
Part Three - Usefulness in Reverse

Introduction (for Part Three)

In Part One I explored the theoretical backdrop in which to situate a discussion on the laugh track. Ironically, my navigation through orthodox communication theory, contemporary materialism and theories of the archive likely elicited little in the way of laughter. Further, the serious business of prescribing a format of analysis for exploring the making of a system of laughter (i.e. the Laff Box, the laugh track) appears to have infected Part Two. In typical theoretical humourless fashion, influenced by media archaeology, I explored the laugh track as its *own* media formation. Hardly a chuckle could be drawn by a discourse hell-bent on identifying regimens within the laugh track's implicit temporal order. With that said, the speculative nature of Part Three promises even less chance of comic relief from the constraints of analyticity.

At any rate, we now consider the laugh track, and media of the like, in terms that challenge the limited economy by which Ernst formulates the dynamic and potential of mediatic systems. Effectively, media archaeology can only carry my exploration so far. Rather, to explore the laugh track mechanism as un-mechanized, in conception and in (trans)formation, its seeming antithesis, fostered by Siegfried Zielinski, gets us to dig otherwise. In short, Zielinski's media *an*arch*ae*ology opens onto exploring the formations of media as deviating from the conservativism of efficiency and efficiency of conservativism that guides Ernst's *seen* and *said* analytic. Here, Agamben's non-apophantic thinking about *gesture* as pure means will be helpful. By Agamben we understand that what may be communicable, or an act of showing, is not only an instrument for communication. In other words, *the communicable* is not just a proposition or

what has purpose within a verificatory system. In effect, a thing's communicability may defy an authorizing logic for determining a thing's status or "truth." Accordingly, it may be possible to experience media as un-mediated, not simply as instruments of pre-ceding technological conditions, but as reserves unto themselves. In step with Agamben's notion of the gesture, Zielinski unfetters media from knowable and determining conditions. This means circumventing the archive, the material gathering point of *the technological* authorized to determine media as mediative. Effectively, Zielinski strips the archive of its presumed authority. He thus explores media formations unbounded by the epistemic parameters that comprise Ernst's *seen* and *said*.

Alternatively, but within the very operation of Ernst's archaeological discursive, I examine that which does not exceed, maintain, conserve, expand or break a system's logic. Rather, I explore uselessness. Conceptually slippery and often tacitly dismissed as irrelevant to the workings of a medium, uselessness is under-examined. However, as I argue, uselessness is not just to be dismissed as un-anticipated waste, by-products, deficiencies etc. of what is useful. It is the implicit reserve of procedures that always already occur as the pre-figured delimiters of a system. Consequently, uselessness may be far more a part of our media formations than accounts in accord with contemporary discourse permit. In fact, from my perspective on media and consistent with my exploration of the laugh track, uselessness, perhaps manifest as in-optimal performance or dud mechanism, plagues the perceived instrumentality of media. Thus, in attempting to account for uselessness within media formations we may come to re-conceive their operations otherwise to what holds true for a programmatic governed by technological order and effective communicative practice.

Chapter Ten: The Expansive and Expanding Category of Machines *or* Dealing with Impotency

In chapter eight I discussed Jonathan Sterne's thinking on how to approach the history of sound technology. In his view, we need proceed analytically rather than chronologically. Sterne's approach suggests that the laugh track and other media formations could be explored independently of a universal historical timeline. Likewise, media archaeology provides a complementary methodology for exploring media as discrete technological formations. It permits executing laugh track-specific research without a cultural rationale. The laugh track, like any other media formation, can then be understood as having emerged under particular technological conditions. Further, relying on Wolfgang Ernst's account of media archaeology, we can understand the laugh track to be a self-perpetuating and transformative process.

In this chapter, I examine what Ernst's *generativist* account of media entails. As previously discussed, Ernst prompts us to be sensitive to the general idea that there are different temporal realities. In particular, he leads us to attend to the archival mechanisms for mediating perceptions within those realities. For, as Ernst would have it, the archive's organizing formation guides our understanding of what comes into being. Thus it appears that media formations emerge within a broader system of inheritance. Media formations possess technological traits that permit their development and role in contributing to future formations. Certainly, descriptions of media are circumscribed by seemingly relevant disciplinary discourses (i.e. mathematics, computer science, applied engineering, etc.) Ernst's transformative account gains traction, however, by positing timeless attributes that activate the archive's affordances. Accordingly, I dig up the philosophical investments implicit in Ernst's accounting for media

histories as being *dynamic,* progressive and future-determining. In turn, understanding the notions guiding the nature and potential that inheres in media formations we may, over the coming chapters, assess how the laugh track is actually a deviant formation within this program of analysis.

History as Technique

If we grant that this discourse unfolds under a sign of a desire for the real, as we must do in order to justify the inclusion of the annals form among the types of historical representation, we must conclude that it is a product of an image of reality in which the social system, which alone could provide the diacritical markers for ranking the importance of events, is only minimally present to the consciousness of the writer or, rather, is present as a factor in the composition of the discourse only by virtue of its absence. Everywhere it is the forces of disorder, natural and human, the forces of violence and destruction, which occupy the fore-front of attention. The account deals in qualities rather than agents, figuring forth a world in which things happen to people rather than one in which people do

> things. (Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity
>
> in the Representation of Reality," 14)

Apart from being informed by Kittler and Foucault, Ernst gains his insight from Hayden White's influential critique of historical analysis. He learns from observations like the one quoted above that our utterances and writings concerning the past have not only been packaged in conventional story-form. Rather, they are often reported or recorded in non-story-like forms organized by social and environmental forces.

White's essay "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" contrasts three kinds of historical representation: annals, chronicles[145] and classical narrative. He illustrates this by providing citations from an unknown annalist whose descriptions of events, which take place over a period of 35 years (709AD to 734 AD), are presented as a chronological list. The descriptions are mostly of battles, famine and weather conditions.[146] It is not a commitment to a universal registry that supports or extends narrativization. Rather, as White highlights, our modes of de-scribing (past) occurrences indicate different experiences of time and perceptions of causal forces. White explains,

> Reality for this annalist wears the face of adjectives which override the
>
> capacity of the nouns they modify to resist their determinacy. (HW, 14)

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[145] "While annals represent historical reality as if real events did not display the form of story, the chronicle represents it as if real events appeared to human consciousness in the form of unfinished stories." (Haydn White, p. 9, Critical inquiry, 1980)

[146] It is important to note, this account does not contradict Sterne's objection to proceeding chronologically. The annalist's listing system is only a placeholder for the mechanical operations of noting that are suggestive of one's technological conditions.

and

> ... the presence of these blank years in the annalist's account permits us to perceive, by way of contrast, the extent to which narrative strains to produce the effect of having filled in all the gaps, to put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time. In fact, the annalist's account calls up a world in which need is everywhere present, in which scarcity is the rule of existence, and in which all of the possible agencies of satisfaction are lacking, absent, or exist under imminent threat of death. (HW, 15)

The annalist fails to fulfill the expectations of the classical historian. Their entry does not knit together "relevant facts" to support an overview with a purpose to explain or interpret what allegedly transpired. We are not provided with a narratively organized field of events and a teleology. Rather, the annalist only offers a catalogue of events which may or may not be related. Similarly, in the last chapter, I approached the laugh track. I avoided presenting the laugh track as a story or within a larger story of media. I represented events – Bing Crosby's appropriation of the laugh track, Larry Gelbart's reaction to the laugh track – as distinct modes of a formation. The general idea was to describe the laugh track's emergence as its own archival system and time regulated operation.

At any rate, for White, the lack of continuities and authorial presence[147] in the annalist's bare-bone recordings suggests that time is a particular relation within environmentally determined perceptions. Further, as we read, White speculates that the annalist's system of jottings is ordered by "fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time." White suggests that the annalist's scribing and lack thereof – the "blank years" – are existentially poignant. For instance, the times of food scarcity and subsistence resources may be told by blanks. That is, by a lack of description. Accordingly, one's imaginative landscape – the annalist's woeful fantasies and desires – is determined by never-ending, debilitating shortage. In a word, the actual form[148] of entry indicates one's living conditions. Still, for White, the larger point is that the annalist's entries are ordered by its particular sense of time. Likewise, Ernst approaches media. Each media formation has its own temporal order that relates to a larger condition of technological allowances. With respect to expressions of fantasy however I question that the mechanism telling of a circuitry of perception is all that revealing. Beyond a direct telling, it might also indicate (or not indicate) what eludes that circuitry. Perhaps, the annalist's entries are incomplete. Rather, the annalist's *lack* inadvertently registers what cannot be registered. In chapter fourteen I revisit what may be attributed to the "blank years." I examine how "fantasy" is neglected by Ernst. Conversely, fantasy inspires Siegfried Zielinski's alternative approach to media archaeology whereby he explores inventions beyond quantificatory metrics. Zielinski gets us to engage media, the laugh track included, independently of a checklist of technological means and outcomes. Accordingly, I probe whether an annalist's fantasies might also suggest lesser determined modes and practices that are not communication friendly. On the one hand, we interrupt Ernst's generative discursive

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[147] That would take the form of either the historian or a historical condition.
[148] And formlessness.

circuitry for conceiving the archive. On the other hand, we gain insight for engaging the laugh track as system of archivation lacking a generative through-line calculus.[149]

For now though, as Ernst emphasizes, the annalist's entries[150] are all preceded by and presumably organized by calendar. In many instances, the annalist's entries appear only as a succession of numbers (hence, "the presence of blank years") with a written entry or noted event (i.e., a king's death) graphically interrupting the list of ascending dates (for example, 1066, 1067, 1068, etc.). Opposed to standard or traditionally "rationalist" approaches to recorded history, there is no universal back-drop of continuous or continued experience. The annalist does not gloss inexplicable gaps in the record as lived duration or more fruitfully as machinations and mechanism-producing events. For the annalist, and this is very significant for Ernst's non-narrative conception of media archaeology, "occurrence" *is* the event of the record. As White puts on display, "occurrences" are listed (as present or absent) only by means of counting. In essence, the act of counting, charting or inventorizing time, *is* "the occurrence" (one bound by numeric registering) of and for the annalist. And, by extension, the community or particular region that may be represented and recorded.

A *home/category* for the Laugh Track?

Ernst is greatly indebted to White's idea that annals are suggestive of divergent temporal realities. He thus institutes, in the very mechanics of his archaeological approach, the logical

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[149] In this sense, the laugh track's mediative possibilities are not limited to what shows.
[150] That is, at least the ones that White documents.

requirement that each medium be examined as its own temporal regime.[151] To advance the notion

that modern archival technology and media, of either analogue or digital origin, are inherently

temporally regulated Ernst contends the following:

> With the age of so-called analog media such as the phonograph and the
>
> cinematograph, signs of or in time themselves can be registered. Not only
>
> do they maintain a symbolical relationship to macro and micro time (such
>
> as historiography), but they inscribe and reproduce functions of time
>
> themselves. It is only with the digital computer that the symbolic regime
>
> *dia*lectically[152] returns, this time in a genuinely dynamic mode (which
>
> differentiates implementation of software from the traditional
>
> Gutenberg galaxy): algorithmic time and operative diagrams. (Wolfgang
>
> Ernst, *Digital Memory*, 30)

Here Ernst distinguishes between two automated formats and their consequent mediatic regimes.

The *analog* is conceived as the diverse mechanical operative of universal standard time

measurement. And the *digital* is actually thought to be generative of time.[153] Digital electronic

media, well independent of a universal metric of time, operate by their own time(s). Just as with

Tan Lin's account of disco, they require being treated as inherently discrete archival processors

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[151] Noting the critique charged by Lisa Gitelman towards Kittler's techno-determinist historical account of media as ironically tending towards an *a*historical program of technology it appears Ernst also unwittingly makes *archeology* of archaeology or a formation of time outside and preceding historical formations.

[152] Ernst later explains *dia.* See p.105, Digital Memory.

[153] Though seemingly uncomfortable with the designation *analog* (to characterize 19th and 20th century reproductive media technology), Ernst makes use of playing *the digital* off of *the analog* in order to contrastingly prompt engaging with storage and collection engendered by its supposed antecedent.

generative of further archiving and processing. Accordingly, like the medieval-time perception-bound inscriptions of White's annalist, time is grasped, through individuated processes of counting, as a means of accounting that occurs at some specified rate. A digital device's algorithmic time acts as data rate regulator. It is a coding standard, not simply for when, but for how materials may be sorted and accessed. Here, space, or the place of storage for audio, visual and even *material* objects are not physical,[154] rather, computer hardware programs archive by bit counters (clocking formula) determining the relation between the speed of data transfer and the rates system's amass data.

This new ordering mechanism recasts our conception of time and relation to media technology in emergent terms. Further, it inaugurates divergent epistemologies with *yet to be* conceived forms of categorization and comparison. Considerably optimistic about the future archive, Ernst writes of the potential that digitally configured compiling systems promise for experiencing media, perhaps more *purely* or less-narratively mediated, *as* media.

> This "archive" is no longer simply a passive storage space
> but becomes generative itself in algorithmically ruled processuality. Sound
> and images at the borderline of digital addressability can be navigated
> through large amounts of data unfiltered by linguistic words. Images and
> sounds thus become calculable by pattern recognition algorithms. Such
> procedures not only media-archaeologically excavate but also
> generate unexpected statements and perspectives. The audiovisual
> archive can, for the first time, be organized not just by metadata but

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[154] i.e., a box of disks, reels, papers etc. on a shelf.

according to proper media-inherent criteria – a sonic and visual memory in its own medium. What is being digitally "excavated by the computer" is a genuinely code-mediated look at a well-defined number of information patterns that human perception calls "sound" or "images." Contrary to traditional semantic research in the history of ideas, such an endogenic audiovisual archive will no longer list sound and image sequences exclusively according to their authors, subjects, and time and space metadata of recording. Instead, digital data banks will allow audio-visual sequences to be systematized according to genuinely signal-parametric notions (mediatic rather than narrative *topoi*), revealing new insights into their informative qualities and aesthetics. (WE, 29)

Ultimately, Ernst attempts to dispense with only analyzing archives as preserving "history" through the authority of their recordkeeping. Instead, following Foucault, archives, especially digitally encoded ones, need be examined as discrete technological formations (timing mechanisms) that generate conditions for knowledge of pasts, along with presents and futures. [155]

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[155] Aside from the implications of Ernst's conception of transformative processes, Ernst is very consistent in thinking through the implications of his approach. He makes us aware that in shifting authorizing powers to the machine, we also institute a shift in powers of observation. Simply, we are not independent of our machines. Further, following Foucault, the researcher's status changes (or rather gets re-determined or determined differently). From once being the one that interprets an archive's holdings, the researcher/theorist is now an impressionable receiver whose interpretations are determined by the active transforming processes of the computer's assemblage and compiling capacities. Effectively, Ernst reiterates Foucault's point that "the archive is not that which, despite its immediate escape, safeguards the event of the statement, and preserves, for future memories, its status as escapee." (Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 129) While updating Foucault's proclamation,

> it [the archive] is that which defines the mode of occurrence of the statement-thing; *it is the system of its functioning*. Far from being that which unifies everything that has been

For exploring the laugh track as an archive, it is this generative aspect of Ernst's thinking that is most suggestive. The paradigm of preservation limits the archive to being a records holder, a "memory aid," a host to a retrievable spool of laughs, in short, a means serving an end. Conceived as generative, we instead attend to the archive as that which makes what *is* possible, even the archive *itself*. The rules of a media formation are thus in formation. This is in step with Agemben's discomforting wisdom that the gesture is purely unto its own, disconnected from human being, purpose and appropriative *mechanisms*. Ernst puts in abeyance the abstract notions that media mediate our perceptions of things.[156] Instead, things, things that mediate, can come alive on their own. Similarly, we may grasp this with respect to past fears over the deployment of laugh tracks. For *M*A*S*H*'s Larry Gelbart the laugh track's operations seemingly surpassed perception. It not only reproduced laughter; the laugh track continued to mediate independently of what's possible within a human-centred timeframe. Gelbart was not only being snide and metaphorical about replacing the human, he was articulating the laugh machine's power and authority. Its temporal circuitry exceeds the limits of death. In effect, the laugh track mediates through death as if making a material and generative medium of an imaginary after-world.

In summa, displacing human-centric narrativist strategy, Ernst re-locates the power of a formation to the system of its functioning. The media are the story. However, as we shall see, there is a rather familiar make-up to "the story." Ernst deploys classically authorized terms by

said in the great confused murmur of a discourse ... it [the archive] is that which differentiates discourses in their multiple existence and specifies them in their duration." (MF, 129)

[156] Moreover, we see the purposes we assign to things are merely the comfort food of the authoritarian.

which we understand a media formation to be generative. He imparts universal traits of *dynamic* and *potential* to the discreteness of each media formation. In effect, he sets up accounting for technological allowances within a broader system of inheritance. Apart from a medium possessing its own attributes, it possesses traits that permit being a generative formation.

Dunamis and *Potentia*

Ernst focuses on the various formations of time-keeping, time-capsule-making, time-extending and time-making (of and for history) by particular holding and managing protocols of digitalized archival systems. They are what "defines the mode of occurrence"[157] of what's placed in reserve.[158] More to the point, reserve, in our cybernetic age, is less about storage than it is transferability or readiness for transit. "Reserve" is set by always altering time delineations.[159] As "the system of its functioning" each archive, be it text-based or algorithmic, is an ever-transforming conglomerate of discrete time de-limited configurations of data.[160] Thus, by Ernst's contemporizing of Foucault's notion of the archive as active and fecund, we appear to be able to put the laugh track (the Laff Box and all laugh track technological configurations) in the cross-hairs of a machine-driven logic. His logic gives place and trajectory to the techno-historical contingency of the laugh track's inherent generativity and archival reflexivity. As an ever-expanding archive, the constitution of the laugh track may then be properly researched *as* and *within* a field of fluctuating and displaced temporalities. Still, we are unclear as to the specific

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[157] See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 129.

[158] We may then re-phrase White's medieval annalist as an example of an analogue registration system operating by their specific temporal determinants.

[159] See Wolfgang Ernst's *Digital Memory*, p. 100: "storage is a transfer across temporal distance."

[160] Still, for either kind of cultural archaeologist (discourse or media) individuated temporal mechanisms, in essence the measure of their immanence, are thematized as the *existentiel* proper to the archives.

form, force and play that operationalizes this medium. In Ernst's vision, what defines its "mode of occurrence" or "system of its functioning?" Is it a generic or system-specific type of generativity? These questions are extremely important for my exploration of the laugh track. If we derive the discrete operations of a system from a pool of technological traits, then we get no closer to encountering a medium by Agamben's idea of the gesture. The laugh track media formation is simply reduced to having emerged from a normative condition.

Jussi Parikka identifies "dynamic" to be an important notion for Ernst's Media Archaeology. It is crucial to describing how algorithmic processes carry the always changing, updating and chance unfolding of a medium. Parikka writes,

> Instead of typically emphasizing machine time as repetitious, Ernst is keen to argue for the importance of such time regimes for our general cultural understanding of temporality. This points toward mathematicotechnical notions of time – iterations, recursions, short circuits – as a crucial part of how we should think "history," too. The basis of this operational approach is the idea that we need to see media technologies as dynamic. They are active agents in participating in "media events" in the way they store, process, and transmit signals and act as a necessary condition of knowledge. Because they are dynamic, they have a special relation to rhythmics, sound, and in general the sonic sphere, which becomes less an index of a relation to the human body (Ernst often distances himself from any "emphatic" emphases in cultural analysis) and instead a way to understand signals in their temporal being. (Jussi Parikka - Editor, Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory*, 15)

Ernst routinely counter-poises his account of the modern archive to its classical counterpart. His is a dynamic system bereft of a punctuated and demarcating identificatory scheme. Conversely, he declares that classical archives have been organized by "emphatic"[161]or storage-biased mnemotechnics. *Emphatic memory* engenders a static approach to the record, one in which archival systems are governed by strategies for preserving and monumentalizing the past. Ernst thus recasts media analysis in terms of *static* and *dynamic* formations. And, he, it appears, effectively re-boots the ancient philosophical quarrel between Heraclitus and Parmenides.[162] To reckon with modern day technological systems as undergoing continual and seemingly unpredictable change, he proffers, as filtered through Charles Pierce,[163] a Heraclitian processual-infused form of conceptualizing.

As per Parikka, we gather Ernst's accounts of "dynamic flow," "dynarchives,"[164] and the "dynamic temporality of systems" to be crucial for producing an archivology of media. However, his vision for the archive extends beyond Hayden White's thinking that the annalist's

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[161] Ernst giving emphasis to *emphatic* in contrast to *dynamic* (i.e. "There is an increasing spatiotemporal entanglement: the gap between traditional resident emphatic archives and ultra-speed transfer narrows; emphatic memory is progressively undermined by a shift of emphasis toward memorizing, the dynamic process based on a network of micromemories and interacting micromemorial hierarchies." (Ernst, DM, 100)) strikes me as ironic given that in a list of synonyms for "dynamic" provided by the *Miriam Webster Dictionary/Thesaurus*, amongst other words, "emphatic" is listed as synonymous with dynamic.

[162] Here, this observation is of no mere scholastic penchant for (re)turning to supposed beginnings or source points.

[163] Certainly Ernst's processual-based account of media can be drawn from the responsivity implicit in diagrammatic reasoning advanced by C.S. Peirce but it is by Felix Guattari's conceptualization of the machine that Aristotle's thinking regarding *dunamis* or "potentiality" gets contemporized to accommodate a non-linear non-rooted but expansive account of *formation*, rather than being restricted to isolable *forms*.

[164] In the next chapter we will pursue the potency of this object-oriented configuring of coming digital archival registries.

texts are contingent representations limited by a specific perception of time. Further, it supersedes Foucault's notion that "*the arché* is the governing rule for the emergence of sensible phenomena." [165] More to the point, the provisional manner by which we may investigate the laugh track as a media formation is in question. There appears to be a behind-the-scenes *form* determining, inclusive of the archive's self-generativity, what the archive makes possible. The rules of a media formation are then in formation only on the surface of things. Rather, more than being the *loci* of rule, we may see Ernst's richly endowed *arche* is the absolute and generative starting-point and force driving whatever media formation: an arche-technological source possessive of a hard-wired genetics invested with universal form-giving powers. In effect, it appears Ernst re-invigorates Aristotle's form of thinking regarding potentiality or, from the ancient Greek, *dunamis*. For Aristotle, often contrasted with *energeia*, *dunamis* refers to the power and capacity of a thing to effect, change or transition into different states.[166] Conversely, *energeia* refers to a form's[167] "actuality," its mode of being in which a thing can either bring about other things or can be brought about by other things.[168] Ernst's hereditary-based description of our computerized world runs parallel to Aristotle's metaphysics. As its own active generative matrix of possibility, an archegenesis, it presumes a similar idealization of *actuality* and *potentiality*.[169]

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[165] See Wolfgang Ernst's *Digital Memory*, p.100.

[166] See *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, MacMillan Press, 1984.

[167] We grasp from Aristotle's *physics* form, in contrast with Plato's ideatic realm of forms, is always wedded to matter. Accordingly, as with any physical substance, the form and matter of things are characterized by measurables/observables, properties specifiable in terms of quality and quantity.

[168] See *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, MacMillan Press, 1984

[169] We may recall that Aristotle's cosmogenic economy yields gains grounded in two elemental aspects of a form: the actuality of a form by its phenomenology or attributes of presence (describable as facts or events) and, by contrast, the potentiality of a form as a *possible becoming* due to powers that inhere in things (*the actual* and in the elements of what is actualized).

By all appearances, Ernst's media archaeology could readily host Aristotle's cosmogenic coordinates. Generally considered, *dunamis*, before it shows, before it gets actualized or becomes *energeia* (in whatever the mediatic form), is the play and force of a system (or network of systems). Specifically, the dynamic of a computer network – the very becoming of a system's own temporality – *is* its capacity for transformation. The tension between *actuality* and *potentiality* stages a never-ending process (of what's seen and said). For Ernst, this process is exhibited by an ever expansive logic. Computerized counting processes are thus mechanized procreativity. They entail a ceaseless overcoming and renewal of recoding, rereading and rewriting.

In moving forward, I consider how the reserve of the laugh track may occur within or as a kind of dynamic form of achivation. In essence, can Ernst's notion of the dynamic archive accommodate exploring the laugh track as an unproductive formation, a uselessness in reserve? Still, larger questions arise: Beyond the mandate of providing a descriptive method for experiencing media as "media" how committed is Ernst to imputing a time-less hereditary structure or genetic blue-print to media? If predicated on an absolutist arche-genesis, does media archaeology then reduce media to being teleological? In the next chapter I will examine Ernst's account of dynamic computer programs set within the 'flow of the world.' He sees them as responsive and interactive transformative systems that afford to future media a seemingly unlimited inventive prowess. In contrast to Ernst's approach that grants creative authority to arithmetic mechanisms, I turn to Siegfried Zielinski's deviant version of media archaeology. He accounts for media invention in terms that expand the horizon of research, beyond media formations being quantifying regimes, to include lesser formulaic practices. For Zielinski, the genesis of media formations is often hodgepodge. Technological inventions, though frequently

executed by applied mathematics, emerge from a diverse reserve of techniques and experimentations.

Chapter Eleven: An Always Hungry Counting System

> My version of media archaeology tries to carry further Foucault's approach. My media archaeology is an archaeology of the technological conditions of the sayable and thinkable in culture, an excavation of evidence of how techniques direct human or nonhuman utterances—without reducing techniques to mere apparatuses (encompassing, for example, the ancient rules of rhetoric as well). (Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory*, 195)

In the quote above Ernst states he wishes to conduct media archaeology without "reducing techniques to mere apparatuses." If formulated as apparatuses, techniques would then be intractable implements. Likewise, future developments of a medium would already be determined. However, for Ernst, "techniques" are fluid, alterable and adjustable. They are the responsive means of a system. In turn, a system which is constituted by technique, given what its materio-technological conditions permit, is also responsive. With this conception of things, Ernst approaches the archive. It is the arena in which the forces of technology have assembled. And where, to restate, media shows itself as generative algorithmic formations. Through media archaeological excavation, we thus may understand how systems drive production and change.

In this chapter I think through the consequences of Ernst's analytical commitments informing a system of inheritance. I question: how dynamic is Ernst's media archaeology? Where in his conception of particular dynamic systems are we permitted to reckon with elements within that do not necessarily achieve their supposed designed purpose? In terms of a general line of inquiry to account for uselessness within media formations, I am thinking of those elements that might be secretive, possibly incalculable, even dis-integrative and un-productive. Much like the ephemeral character of Eldritch Priest's *glitch*, these are things that the archive often does not show in its production of more archive. Ultimately, my objective is to explore how the laugh track may be an instance of a dynamic expansive archival process. However, its dynamism may also involve processes that deviate from being purposive and productive. Thus, for the coming chapter, I will mine the "technological conditions" towards which Ernst directs his archaeology. In a much broader sense than a 'description of the working rules for saying and thinking,' I recast "technological conditions" to include lesser-known and perhaps indescribable processes. These are faulty, incomplete and without the apparent goal-oriented offerings of invention which known and successful media may derive and maintain.

Use-Oriented Algorithms

In a section of *Digital Memory and the Archive* on the future of the object-oriented archive, Ernst contrasts contemporary developments in search engine design to the static classificatory framework by which access to traditional archives were conceived. His analysis relies on the dynamic/emphatic opposition outlined in the last chapter. For Ernst, the programming languages of Java, Python and C++ enable interactive engagements with the archives. By these programming tools, the contemporary archive may be configured to be an

always in-process reconfiguration. In effect, algorithm paths, generative of different methods and means of classification, permit system responsiveness to the range of searches conducted or yet to be conducted by an archive's user.

Ernst tells of the art database *Europeana*, a website for the written, aural and visual cultural past of Europe.[170] In this site, one may access an archive in ways that are sensitive to a collection having seemingly countless aesthetic properties.

> Dynamic information rasters and new search methods that go beyond the rigid indexes of traditional finding aids come into play. An exemplary archive pool with selected attractors provides the requisite basis. Through their queries, users then create further archive elements to be digitized and stored. With the aid of agents and filters, the object-oriented archive thus takes shape cumulatively, entailing a shift from read-only paradigms to a generative, participative form of archival reading. Source-oriented stock and classical file-oriented archive practices yield to the use-oriented ("to be completed") "dynarchive." (Wolgang Ernst, *Digital Memory*, 81-82)

Effectively, the new-style archive eschews logic-based programming that, operating by classical methodology, restricts searches to an archives finite classification or management system. Instead, it engages information as an ongoing process of gathering and searching. Here, Ernst

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[170] Those being its images (paintings, drawings, maps, photos and pictures of museum objects), texts (books, newspapers, letters, diaries and archival papers), sounds (music and spoken word from cylinders, tapes, discs and radio broadcasts), videos.

conceives of the in quotation "dynarchive" politically, as culturally progressive, or at least promising being such.[171] It is not the one-sided affair in which the institution and its archons, forever to be held beyond the reaches of public interest, delimit access to an *arcana imperii*.[172] Europeana's collection is responsive to whatever and however those of the public may seek access or conceive of what materials may be found. Apart from the politic of distribution, for Ernst, the "dynarchive," or at least his example of such, is dynamic, not so much due to its open accessibility but because of its very data-architecture. Thus, much like object-oriented program (OOP) language, the cultural memory to come is to be configured through algorithms that are continually being reconfigured to adjust to new and more data. This is a shift from a macro to a micro-temporal approach to indexing the past. It entails the user process or engage one's culture, and their history, as if always in transition, or as Ernst puts it, (that is yet) "to be completed."[173]

The techniques for knowing or obtaining "knowledge" that stage and advance a continued expansion of knowledge have overtaken previous models that were oriented towards containment of things or a registry of set facts. We are less and less under the influence of the old

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[171] Certainly Ernst is not blind to media being deployed for manipulative purposes, but he does emphasize its liberative potential.

[172] As an aside, we see a parallel with Charley Douglass' plan for the Laff Box. He wanted to be source and arbiter of mechanical laughs. The humour of this stance need not go unnoticed. Given the laughs are retreads, his curatorial authority is especially caricature. Instead, against his archonic inclination, Douglass ultimately contributed to the dispersive and expansive use and configurations of laugh tracks.

[173] Our techniques for thinking, here constructing memory according to an open-ended schema of digital mnemotechnics, are thus acted on in ways particular to the operations of our tools, by our tools. Very reminiscent of Kittler's appropriation of an observation by Nietzsche, we pretty much have come to organize our thoughts very much as these OOP'ed computers that reserve or store through continual transfer of data.

belief that objects are somehow re-presentable as subjects complete unto themselves.[174] And yet, Ernst is very clear on not fixing or making deterministic the terms of our "use-oriented" interactions with machines. If our new archival systems *are more about* the "to be completed" data transfer[175] *than* as a once-and-for-all contained storage, then it is in this narrative open-ended manner that we will interact with "our always transforming systems." That is, our world, our engagement in and with it, is also in process. And by Ernst's thinking, this gives further *dynamic* play and indeterminacy to our network(s) of systems. Thus Ernst avoids "reducing techniques to mere apparatuses."[176]

Without there being an overseeing authorizing database for our always-expanding or further integration of already integrated algorithmic systems, hardware re-writes and re-mediates *itself*. By this overview of "the technological conditions of the sayable and thinkable in culture" our world including *human* participants is a complex process of media and mediation. As with the previously quoted observation by Jussi Parikka, our interaction with media formations are integral to their mediation. As he puts it, "we are media and of media." We are not separate from media's workings. Still, Ernst gives much authority to the algorithm. It is the carry-over-carry-forth operation of closed system circuitry generative of certain kinds of code and computation. It is what permits the growth or expansion of contemporary technological systems. Systems of math and their extensions in mechanization engineer what has and will be invented. In the remainder of this chapter and throughout the next, I turn to exploring the role of algorithms in the

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[174] A knowing that is blind to its knowing very much in the sense of what we encounter in Avital Ronell's *Stupidity*.

[175] As in a system's functioning, execution of rules, a system's making gains or will to power and will to knowledge, "the process" as it were.

[176] Computer hardware is but an always transforming shell that is designed to adapt as use of it changes. – It is thus always in process of algorithmic reconfiguring.

processes of invention. No doubt Charley Douglass' Laff Box must conform to calculations determined by TV or radio broadcast frequency standards and, among other things, audio-tape technical specifications. Without compliance to principals of typewriter mechanics and the sound technologies, the Laff Box cannot operate. However, the Laff Box or laugh track, as I have argued, is not a media formation that only emerges because of developments in electronic engineering. There are other inventive mechanisms that have lead to its kind of formation. We thus come to question the media archaeologist: are inventions always the result of materio-technological conditions? Or might inventions also generate conditions? Moreover, in what ways do inventions occur?

The Productive Divide

Unlike manual workers surrounded by their tools and industrial workers standing at their machines, photographers are inside their apparatus and bound up with it. This is a new kind of function in which human beings and apparatus merge into a unity. It is therefore appropriate to call photographers functionaries. (Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 27)

In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, philosopher Vilém Flusser accounts for the "fundamental" frame in which the photographer operates. We grasp that the photographer is a part of the image-making machine. Like emissaries or state representatives sent on missions abroad, photographers carry out the operations of the camera. In a word, indeed a very mechanistic-sounding word, they are its functionaries. Generally considered, Flusser's analysis outlines the divide between a tool or machine and a system of procedures, an apparatus. The olden-day system of relations between the worker and his tools apparently was far less circumscribed. Instead, these days, the worker is a technician whose tools permit an execution of pre-set routines. In the case of the photographer, the photographer's production is fully regulated by the operations of the camera. To be sure, Flusser is neither concerned with the content of images nor the format of their documentation. The content could be of whatever kind or style and the documentation could be for whatever purpose. Rather, Flusser reflects on generating image content by a mechanized program that, by a set or series of computations, organizes our material productions.[177] I note that we again encounter function, or at least a variant on such. Flusser considers the practitioner to be a part of a machine's generativity. Akin to Foucault's conception of functioning, Flusser casts the functionary as a system's organizational proxy. In line with Ernst's media archaeology, the human is an operative of media. Likewise, it may be

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[177] The camera, as Flusser sees it, extends the mathematical paradigm of the Cartesian. In other words, it continues the Western tradition's scientific project (Flusser cites both Descartes and Nicholas of Cusa) of, through numbers, "bringing thinking matter in line with extended matter." (This would appear to be a slogan of the sciences by the way Flusser frames it in his text on p.31 of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*.) However, for Flusser, the camera is not simply the result of *the digital* forging new algorithmic pathways. Rather, the camera comes together under a host of forces. It takes form by industries ranging from: "the photographic industry that programmed the camera;" "the industrial complex that programmed the photographic industry;" and, "the socio-economic system that programmed the industrial complex."

inferred, Charley Douglass, whether as Laff Box archon or inventor, would have been a mere system assembler and button-pusher. He was an expression of the machine.

At any rate, the functionary aside, unlike Ernst, Flusser examines the complex of industrial forces for generating a medium – here photography – as apparatuses. He does not consider apparatuses reductively nor leading to a reductionist account. Rather, apparatuses are fluid formations. Even so, Flusser elaborates on apparatuses much like how Ernst examines the formation of particular "techniques." They are identifiable processes that authorize what's thinkable and sayable within culture. For Flusser "the human" is at play with the apparatus. Or, as he declares, liberated from manual labour of past image-making production (i.e. drawing or painting), "they [humans] are free to play."[178] The "language of liberation" aside, as we see, Flusser's conception of an apparatus as a "plaything" appears quite provocative. Whereby, notions of play may inspire questions pertinent to the processes and stages of inventions. For instance, about what playfulness may go on in the stages of generating code for a computer's hardware and software. However, Flusser's account is not so play-ful. He writes:

> These reflections make it possible to attempt the following definition of
> the term "apparatus:" It is a complex plaything, so complex that those
> playing with it are not able to get to the bottom of it; its game consists of
> combination of symbols contained within its program; at the same time
> this program was installed by a metaprogram and the game results in
> further programs; whereas fully automated apparatuses can do without

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[178] See Vilém Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, p.29.

human intervention, many apparatuses require the human being as a player and a functionary. (VF, 31)

The depth of an apparatus' symbolic ordering exceeds its "player's" comprehension. A "player" and, as he tells us, a programmer, only gains access to what they can play with. Players and programmers are restricted to playing with a small element of a greater and expansive system. There should be little doubt then that "the functionary" is entirely circumscribed. More significantly, the invented precedes what will be realized by the productive metrics of an apparatus. For Flusser, an apparatus, though likely concretized and knowable through the operations of machines, is a seemingly un-bounded formation. That is, an apparatus is open to generating more apparatus that may, like a snake shedding its skin, transform into another version of *itself*. In a more localized sense, I have similarly accounted for the laugh track. Though restricted to practices mostly active within the broadcast industry apparatus, the laugh track archival system generates more laugh track. Ultimately though, the laugh track provides a study in contrast. The laugh track is corrupt in the gains it makes, in how it quantifies. Unlike Flusser's conception of apparatuses, its rules are not additively oriented. For how I understand the laugh track, "more" and "generative" do not signify progression. Rather, the laugh track's expansion occurs due to an endless loop of repetition. The laugh track always makes more laugh track by being a replay of an already replicated formation. Its system of archivation multiplies the repeating of a repetitive process. Unlike an innovating and transforming apparatus, instead the laugh track media formation paradoxically is a productive imitation of redundancy.

At any rate, Flusser contends that, once upon a time, machines were "invented to simulate specific thought processes." [179] But now, as parts of an apparatus (which could be a camera, computer, the state, etc.), we need to understand the machine's purpose beyond the confines of the proverbial tinkerer's workshop. "Extended in matter," the always counting systems, the active hungry number, without interruption *play on* by their own rules that are, in turn, predicated on a more complex order of rules. At the so-called "meta" level, it would appear[180] the numeric regime unceasingly generates more rules and formulations of rules for continued operation. A program's functioning, operates by and within an order that, through selective processes entailing negation, adds and progresses. Ultimately, for Flusser, the invention process of modern systems is entirely bound by rules. *Play* only occurs nominally. It is a highly insular "to and fro" action occurring within a computational system whereby programmers calculate accordingly within that system.

In all, the main difference between Flusser's conception of the apparatus and Ernst's describing of techniques is that Ernst considers the relationship between computer systems and users to be interactive. For Ernst, auto-generative processes are predicated on a system being responsive to its user. Of course, Flusser was writing at a time before the wide application of Object-Oriented-programming. Flusser's treatise on photography came out in the 1980s. Object-Oriented-programming was more in an experimental stage at that point. It was not until the 90s that it became the standard in programming. However, though the generative mechanism of a responsive algorithm is missing in his account, Flusser, much like Ernst, asserts a partition

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[179] Ibid. p.31.

[180] I say appear because Flusser declares meta-programming as open – "the hierarchy of programs is open at the top" (*Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, p.29). – Which could mean open *to not* generate more rules.

between the designated system and its user. They both conceive of technological systems as independent complexes of computational workings to be, in whatever contained and controlled form of productiveness, *purely* at work. Likewise, Ernst and Flusser have conceived of the generativity and inventiveness of the computational as if immune to a world of uncertainties.

Chapter 12: Dynamism and the Abyss

As I move into the final chapters, I seek alternative concepts and approaches for expanding upon Ernst's limited economy of inheritance to include formations of media that are disinherited and lack hereditary traits. For this, Siegfried Zielinski's divergent approach to media archaeology, called variantology, is vital. As the term indicates, Zielinski's objective is to provoke a varied study of media formations, regardless of whether the studies will deviate from identifiable courses of invention. This, as Ernst himself declares, "advocates an anarchival history of forgotten or neglected media approaches."[181] And, I would go further, Zielinski advocates for a media that never held the possibility of being generative. Actually, in exploring the laugh track as an instance of uselessness, Zielinski's anarchival approach to history permits encountering structural defunctness. Rather than for re-confirming an idealized *technological order*, the laugh track may then be examined as a reserve that deviates from behaving like one. More generally considered, we may thus investigate the traits, integral to a broader and perhaps lesser determined technological condition, that ensure a system of archivation is *in*accessible.

In this chapter, I explore deviations to and within systems thought to be predicated on uninterrupted optimal performance. We see computational systems are not as immune to uncertainty as Ernst and Flusser would have us think. Ultimately, as Zielinski prompts us to understand, focusing on rules overshadows what may not have been so discursive. That is, against what techno-centric media archaeology would have us believe, inventions are not only about what may be within the overt determining of mechanization and mathematics. In fact, there might be more to rules than the logic and principle they appear to convey.

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[181] See Wolfgang Ernst's *Digital Memory*, p. 195.

Programmed Aporias – Easter Eggs, Glitch Areas and The Donkey Kong "Kill-Screen"

From an earlier chapter, Eldritch Priest accounts for "the glitch" as a micro-moment of chaos. It interrupts the contemporary computer system's tasks and idealized presentation. Often, the source or reason for this kind of interruption, though very present audibly or visually, appears inexplicable. However, the glitch is not the only instance in which some form of system deviation occurs that may be hidden to those operating the program. Within the history of computer programming, as with various other media (be it DVD, broadcast, etc.), there are a whole host of hidden or secretive elements embedded within the logic of executable code. For instance, many of us, through an inadvertent downloading of malware, are likely all too familiar with the feeling that our computer navigation systems have been hijacked by a troublesome element that lurks within the system. For the persistent layperson, it often takes hours to track down and delete such a scourge.

Perhaps less disruptive than plagues of unwanted advertisements are the various forms of deviant code that have been written into program language. *Apple* and software companies such as *Microsoft* have routinely sold products to the unassuming consumer containing what are commonly referred to as "easter eggs." Whether in software, or a personal computer's hardware, the "easter egg" is apparently an "unauthorized" message or routine.[182] Often some form of a joke (perhaps only funny amongst programmers), they are keyboard-triggered commands to which the manufacturer has not assigned or sanctioned a particular command set. For example, when using a routine *function key* (f1-f12) or entering a query in the navigator search-box, the

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[182] That is not authorized by the manufacturer of the product.

results yield what appears to be the predicted or "to spec" outcome. However, in certain keystroke combinations or for a particular type of query, the results may lead the user down an unexpected pathway.[183] In the history of "easter eggs" we come across puzzles, puzzling images, sayings, arcane messages and humorous tidbits. Notable deviations are the hidden flight simulator in *Microsoft Office's* 1997 version of its *Excel* program and the inexplicable presence of a pinball game in *Microsoft's* version of *Word*. In the world of video-gaming, the "easter egg" takes on its own complications. It often represents complex and rarified challenges that, to further make the point, break from the manufacturer's "authorized script." In short, secretive easter eggs[184] violate a system's testing protocol and thereby undermine a design's pre-programmed capacity. I would not say that such craft or subversion was ever applied to laugh tracks. However, the length Charley Douglass went to keep the workings of his Laff Box a complete secret from either the public or those in the broadcast industry gives one cause to wonder. In certain respects, his secrecy is parallel to how computer programmers commandeer code. Douglass' formula for laugh tracks were not only patent protected he religiously treated his Laff Box as 'one of a kind,' as if it was immune to external alteration and corruption. Thereby, within the broadcast industry, a Laff Box audience response stood as a unique or specialized production distinct from a generic collection of recorded laughs. Douglass, like rogue computer programmers to come, preserved his own secret within a broader set of rules and routines. With that said, the laugh track, as I have been exploring, is less about the purposes one may have for it. Instead, my focus is on how the laugh track is a quantificatory regime. And how, given its particular archival structuration, it also deviates from a quantificatory metric.

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[183] In these instances might we say that the programmer make a *dis*function key?
[184] Easter eggs often go undetected and are tripped upon by an errant keystroke.

As the student of computer programming may learn, the history of programming from workplace to gaming is filled with the production of hardware and software that contain minefields of yet-to-be detonated rules deviating from rule.[185] For good or for ill, the bored rule-governed programmers' logic bombs underscore a system's hidden processing as well as the limits of a computational system. Of course, the limits of a system are not necessarily final, and certainly, in thinking with Flusser, are not known by programmer or system designer. Actually, within the history of computer programming, right up to recent times, a system's capacity or threshold point suggest a confused and potentially disabling mathematic, that is, a mathematic that does not compute. In other words, at the threshold of a system, computing can be highly variable and uncertain. It is widely known within the computer sciences that faltering computations often occur when the register width of a processor (for instance a 32-bit or 64-bit processor)[186] is exceeded by the total of an arithmetic operation. In these instances, by what is referred to as "integer overflow," a computer's behaviour deviates from standard operating code. The computer scientist is without a mathematical solution and simply declares this behaviour "undefined." The idea I am driving at is that Flusser and Ernst's accounts even after delving into micro-elements of system's quantificatory regimes, overlook the excesses and unavoidable computational error that may inhabit a medium's productive and positive display. They don't address the things that are really of no apparent use and confound problem-solving.[187]

Nintendo's early 1980s *Donkey Kong* "kill screen," at least in the gaming industry, stands as a famous instance of this kind of broken calculus. The game's eight-bit counter exhibits its

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[185] Perhaps some may argue an expansion and expression of a system's general rules.
[186] In either case the width determines the amounts of data that can be numerically represented within a computer's storage capacity.
[187] Where, in various instances, buffers and stopgap measures – sawdust and bubblegum solutions – suffice to permit continued system functioning.

computational oversight at its level twenty-two, the game's highest level of achievement. The "kill screen," however, is not by design. Due to a mathematical formula for calculating point totals,[188] when at the game's highest level of achievement, the Donkey Kong processor permits exceeding its computational capacity, its highest fixed value of 256, by 4. The game's counter (its processor), in overflowing by the remainder of the 4 value, unfairly leaves the player with the values' time equivalent, a meagre 7 seconds, to achieve the new level to which they have advanced. The behaviour, though "undefined" or un-programmed, of course may be criticized as a design flaw. The particular manufacturer had no executable code in place that would have maintained the flow of the game after level 22. With that said, after all these years since the first version of Donkey Kong, the general phenomena of *undefined behaviour* and *integer overflow* have not gone away. Although processor capacities have exponentially increased, systems are still at risk of exceeding their computational thresholds.

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[188] This is the same calculation for all levels.
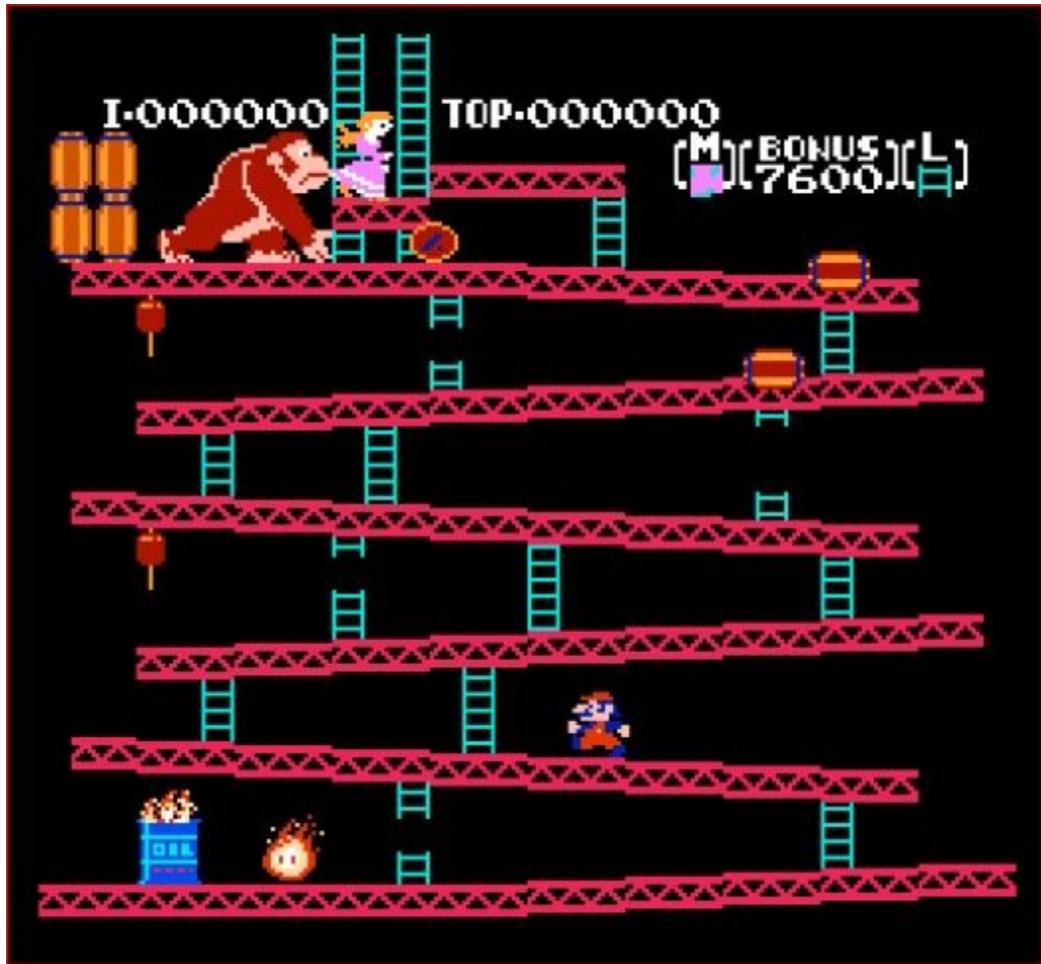
Fig. 2

To avoid these mathematical conundrums, our new systems are programmed with logic

buffers designed to counter-act or at least mitigate computational confusion that ensues when a

system generates a potentially unavoidable arithmetic overload. With contemporary (life)-

support systems – from ground to sea to air – so intricately integrated, the consequences of an

un-programmed digital illogic far exceed the disappointment of a player experiencing the

Donkey Kong "kill screen." The general point is that *systems carry traits* that actually confound

their planning.[189] In effect, the readily identifiable concepts, mechanisms, techniques, and mathematics of invention hold potential for a deviancy from planned outcomes. In one sense, we are really in no position to assume that the terms of a media invention are themselves, as Ernst's and Flusser's teleological thinking presumes, a *fait accompli*. Perhaps we then need other concepts appropriate to a media formation's being unplanned. In another sense, we are provided with instances supporting the main idea guiding my exploration of the laugh track. Within the workings of a system, there are unspecifiable and unproductive elements. For a lot of things, this point appears trivial as long as a system achieves its planned outcome. However, this is in fact how the laugh track is constituted as an archival system. The laugh track as system of registry is a formation of confounded planning that has formed through a precedent repetition. To be sure, I am not commenting on the audio technician's poor archival skills. Rather, the laugh track confounds the logic of progression. It is an archival formation that expands its domain of production by already being an artefact of itself. That is, by its having already been spent.[190] Paradoxically then, its repetition precedes its formation for being an archive – for what permits the laughter of the laugh track to be repeated.

Further to a general exploration of design flaw or, in the instances of "easter eggs," hidden program messages**,** we may also encounter (en)coding limits in other ways. Certain forms of "system crash" also point to programming limits. Within any given computer game exist a program's deficiencies otherwise considered as glitch areas. Again, we recall Eldritch Priest's work on the computer glitch, focused on the commonplace micro-instances of sudden

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[189] To the pessimist these internal contradictions are orchestrated by a programme of planned obsolescence.
[190] In effect, the laugh track's archivation has already been archived. The laugh track repeats what it does prior to being a system for archiving.

unexpected disruption or system malfunction. This time the term "glitch" is extended in scope to refer to an un-programmed area outside of the game's main map. Still, the notion that the computer user experiences some form of disruption holds. We see that once having entered into a glitch area – an out-of-bounds region of a game – the unsuspecting gamer is trapped and lacks resource to return to *the flow* of the "authorized" manufactured game. Often *glitch areas* are visually manifest as an incomplete terrain, a fragment of terrain or even a wall of colour in which there are no graphics. Within a glitch area, often the gamer is rendered impotent. There is no game logic in place within this hidden region of the programmed. In effect, the gamer has chanced upon an un-programmed pothole, an algorithmically supported deficiency within *the programmed* that triggers a system crash.

Given that "easter eggs," glitch areas along with its *abysses*, are the programmer's *executable* manipulations, we are disinclined to put these phenomena in the same category as Priest's glitch. They are not system defects. However, though not defects, as computational divergences, they underscore algorithmic variability. More to the point, these kinds of divergences support my general idea of putting into question how with any certainty we conceive of a particular medium and specifically how it may be formed. Broadly speaking, we here contend with "notions of the computational" as somewhat atypical to how the media archaeologist accounts for media. The computed is never just optimal or without flaw. Within the very genetics of a system, unexpected deviancy from an ordered plan occurs. Are these deviations simply to be cast as the alter-media of a broader technological condition?[191] Or, do we

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[191] Instead, one may suspect, programming shenanigans and various forms of system meltdowns merge the theorized divide between content production and media formation. Likewise, the logic of a system may be exploited to usurp the marketed intended use for graphic display (text

need to approach inventions as potentially incomplete and uncertain formations? To explore the laugh track as an archival system, we may certainly make gains from the discursive orderings of physics and mathematics. These generalized theories and formulations permit accounting for a technological system's form of calculability and material generativity. However, from my exploration of the laugh track we hit a dead end if we are restricted to the media archaeologist's concept of technology that posits it as progressive and generative.

Exploring the Abyss *within* and *of* Media Arch*ae*ology

In exploring media as historical formations, we need be sensitive to what is not overtly governed by a system's practicable category of rules. As the contemporary thrill-seeking programmer that mischievously nests "easter eggs" within computer software, we suspect that the mediatic inventions of the distant past were also imbued with or informed by flights of fancy. Deviating from a standard methodology, their formulations may occur by peculiar and un-chartable circuitries of thought. Following through on the more extreme implications of Foucault's genealogy and archaeologics, Siegfried Zielinski formulates an approach to media archaeology that, contrary to Ernst, gives no sustained authority to the archive. Nor to that which may be ordained as directive or discursive permitting experimentation for what forms as a medium. I believe Ernst's notion of discrete temporality proves to be helpful for grasping media as auto-generative. However, as I have been working through over the last few chapters, his

included) and become another computational mechanism for making play of whatever kind on goal-oriented logic.

conception of media formations being dynamic processes presupposes them to be possessive of a pre-destined transformativity. And this, for Ernst, is apparently knowable by the authorizing of the archive. Against this I contend that this thinking constrains exploring media, in particular the laugh track, by rules that inscribe instrumentality and purpose. Instead, we need other approaches that permit exploring media without adherence to the authority of the archive. Towards which Zielinski presents a worthwhile alternative.

Ultimately, Zielinski's objective is for broadening the economy of archivation. Commenting on his diversified study of media formations called variantology, he states,

> Variantology for me is some kind of an operation to deal with the complex issues of the past and connect them as I said at the beginning to a possible future. I do not look at the past with the interest to find out *what* but with the intention to find out what might have been instead. Also, the alternative of and so on. The single investigations, the tactics which form the imaginary sum of variantologica I call genealogies which is not a neologism on inventions by myself - that comes from Nietzsche ... the most important point is in the context of Nietzsche very closely connected with your subject [the conference's topic of "error"] ... combining the concept of genealogy very strongly with the concept of error and mistakes ... [Zielinski then quotes Michel Foucault] "Genealogy does not go back into the past, to erect a large continuity beyond the diversion of forgetting ... To follow the complex string derivation (Herkunft, not origin) means much more ... to grasp what has happened in derivation: incidents, ...

breaks, errors, ... false bills, which generated what exists and has value for

us." (Siegfried Zielinski, 2010 lecture in Torino Italy,

https://vimeo.com/17301176 , time: 46:05 - 48:36)

Zielinski has us trained on different temporalities that lack or deviate from positive display,

quantification or presence. Instead, he opens onto another economo-theoretic realm that permits

encountering non-generative, un-testable, idiosyncratic, arbitrary aspects of the often diversely

media influenced functionary/programmer/inventor. Thereby, Zielinski attends to the discrete

instances of experimentation that may be *frivolous* or lead nowhere. Accordingly, leveraging off

of Zielinski's extra-archival methodology, we in effect expand our conception of the archive that

permits an unrestricted exploration of the laugh track as system of reserve. It is not restricted to

what shows.

It is not that Zielinski puts invention back in the hands of inventors (thereby restoring

"the human element"). Rather, it is that invention can be thought of as *more than* formulations

with specific goals governed by technologically appropriate disciplinal discursives.[192] Instead, he

gets us to explore more subterranean investments:

> Cultivating dramaturgies of difference is an effective remedy against the
>
> increasing ergonomization of the technical media worlds that is taking
>
> place under the banner of ostensible linear progress. (Siegfried Zielinski,
>
> *Deep Time of the Media*, 259)

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[192] Or, in grander terms, as a particular 'mediating complex' (i.e., the military complex from which Kittler's account derives so much authority) for guiding social activity.

Following this he reminds us of the reality of 'garden variety' commercial products:

> The manufacture of appliances is confronted regularly with its own "periodic infertility," which becomes more apparent because the accelerated tempo of manufacture perpetually forces prevention of inefficiency (in the products) and this invariably drives it in the direction of wastage. The experiment, which is the precondition of efficiency, presupposes the wasteful mistake. To explore in experiments what may result in profitable production is geared to the elimination of infertility in the product but at the price of wasting material and human labor (production costs). (SZ, 279)

In each instant of mediatic formation, whether put in practice, aborted, unfinished or left to imagination there are other elements not so typically elemental to productivity. For Zielinski, such potentially impotent and useless elements are actually the pre-condition of experimentation and, we may suspect, the archive itself. Consequently, we open onto the broader thematic for this discussion. How to account for uselessness in media?

Broadly considered, Zielinski identifies a dis-connect within the study of archived media practices that cannot be accounted for by media archaeology. This disconnect arises from only treating inventions as formations that operate within the goals of practices, techniques and technological ideals. Even though a medium's historical progressions may yet be known, it is readily assumed, within, by and of broader technological processes that they will be communicable. That is, media inventions are pre-authorized by terms – or *technological conditions* as Ernst calls them – that permit them to mediate. For Zielinski, this is a significant

point of contest. Although my paradoxical conception of the laugh track interrupts the circuitry between technological conditions and individual media formations Zielinski's anarchaeology directly challenges the entire basis for the circuitry. Conversely, he attends to inventions as their own practices, techniques and possible ideals that may in no way have anything to do with ergonomic or optimal *design* for achieving system functionality. In effect, Zielinski eschews principals of usability. Likewise, within the inventive process, he encounters possibilities of defunctness. This is not to say he discovers that particular media may become defunct, unusable or obsolescent. Rather, unusability *is a possibility of an* invention.[193] Thus, there is reason to speculate that for Zielinski, "invention" occurs as an *always already* or pre-ceding *de*functness. Contrary to Ernst's dynamic transformative account, media invention entails non-generative elements in which inarticulable sensations of the dream and unquantifiable zeal of imagination authorize and haunt the procedurality implicit in any archivo-temporal or historical-making regime. In this sense, the defunct might be considered as the archi-expenditure of a media formation. Speculation aside, for Zielinski, within the genesis of any media formation[194] is the potential for an unaccounted-for and inexplicable impotency. Put more positively, the joys of incommunicability and arcane tail-chasing encryption also inspire invention. Divergent from a system of inheritance is the possibility of un-inheritable formulations. These are often elements that simply confound quantificatory standards. That is, whether by design or accident an inventor

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[193] Zielinski is interested in the whims of invention. In frivolous or half-baked ideas that emerge in the likely, at times, desultory thought processes of an inventor, a programmer, a functionary. Even though, in the end, such frivolity may not be put to "the count." Still, as Zielinski would have it, these processes cannot be readily *dis*counted.

[194] Which are circumscribed by the metrics of particular computations or temporalities.

may have manufactured a code that may never be decoded and further is that of which may never even be known.[195]

In Zielinski's account of media a*n*archaeology there is no sustained analysis of the terms *impotent* and the *friable*. Even so, these kinds of notions give shape to the anarchegenetic make-up of the media he explores, and further, to how I conceive of the laugh track as an archival formation. In looking ahead to the *would-be* next chapter, I will pursue the significance of dead-end terms denoting uselessness for a certain system of knowledge-making. Presented as an unmarked chapter, "A Pre-Programmed Abyss" is a deadspot, a textual "easter egg" circumscribed by the pointless subject of uselessness. In kind, I examine Etienne Bonnot de Condillac's relatively obscure old chestnut of a thesis wherein he establishes *the frivolous* at the originating moment of the linguistic sign. Condillac's linguistic system represents a rare occasion in which *the frivolous* is overtly examined and explained. Aided by Jacques Derrida's deconstructive navigations through Condillac's confounding logic, I thus stage alternative ways for, in the concluding chapter, engaging Zielinski's anarchic approach to media and the laugh track. His media anarchaeology is not a counter formation to media archaeology rather its implications are far more deviant. It is media archaeology's *other*.

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[195] That is, a secret that may never be known to be a secret.

A Pre-Programmed Abyss...

In the previous chapter I explored deviant elements within the progamming logic of computer games.[196] Even though "abysses" and "glitch areas" are in zones remotely accessible to a game's player, it appears they are a part of a software program's architecture. Much like the "Off-Limits" areas of a ski-hill that play host to unreckoned dangers for even the most skilled, these zones are barely navigable and often quickly lead to a gamer's sudden demise: a *Game Over*! that is not a game over or finality reached within the rules of the *game proper*.[197] We thus encounter "highly discrete" instances of a breach of procedure imbedded in the process of the *main* computational objective. These breaches are not a hidden subtext nor a trap-door leading to the game's *other* (a perverse turn on virtuality). Rather a game screen *abyss* is uncharted terrain – a wasteland or no-man's land within the programmed that indicates other procedures *may* be at play. Just as the game proper of *Call of Duty* has it own timing or even gameplay timings,[198] these aberrant procedures, though perhaps not fully formed, may possess their own temporal order.[199] The general point is that ways of considering *function* and *use* may be expanded. Within the purported functioning elements of a system are *other*-functioning, perhaps non-functioning, elements. What functions is not only to be reckoned with in terms of a system's designed operations. Perhaps we may understand a system's workings, whether or not by design, by its non-transformative elements. Of course, this is what I have been attempting to do through an

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[196] These deviations indicate a temporal distress. This distress may be experienced as a lacking of finiteness, continuity and relevance connected to (within the parameters of the programming software) the apparent/marketted outcome or even the affect of computated play.

[197] Of course, what is the game proper and parergonal to the game proper comes into question.

[198] Given stages of accellerated and decellerated play are often features built into a game's progression.

[199] These are tacitly/discretely zoned off areas that contains a game's divergent logics of often partial, inadequate and even faulty interfacing. (Yes, rationally written off as the digital workbench exhibiting an unfinished game's peaks and plateaus).

exploration of the laugh track as an archival media formation. I have been trying to articulate how this particular technological formation deviates from its technological condition: That it does so through a preceding authorization of a redundancy *function*. Thus, in step with Zielinski's exploration of never-functioning and defunct media, I ask: is a function only that which, well, functions? How might function be thought non-instrumentally?

As stated in the last chapter, Ernst's media archaeology does not accommodate the *un*ergonomically designed media formation. For Ernst, media, in order to be media, needs to demonstrate traits redolent of broader organizing technological conditions. Alternatively*,* whether drawing from Agamben's non-apophantic notion of pure means or Zielinski's discourse-breaking anarchaeology,[200] I attempt to explore the laugh track along with other media as formations that are not authorized by a programmatic of instrumentalization. In step with this, for this (un)chapter, I attempt to get a handle on how *use* and *uselessness* may not be in opposition. Thus, way we may account for media in a way that entertains frivolity without commitment to a use/useless binary. What has to be made clear is that media formations that deviate from quantification or a system's goal may not be *just* a deviation in the oppositional sense. Rather they may occur within rules and may do so most uneconomically. Accordingly, we may need to invent ways to somehow grapple with how uselessness may not be the product or by-product of any system of expenditure.

The *frivolous* would appear to represent the opposite to that which is essential and significant to the workings of things. Thanks in part to Susan Sontag's account of *camp*, the frivolous is commonly thought as designating activity that is silly, deviant and/or superfluous. Accordingly, we have come to readily assume its status in *pop culture*, and culture more

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[200] Which is, no doubt, another discursive that piggy-backs on other discursives.

seriously-considered, as being *oppositional*. However, and to repeat the above point, perhaps *the frivolous*, if indeed there is a connoted category (at best likely an empty one) may not be so readily framed in terms of the implicit binaric pairing: *serious vs. silly*; nor by a more widely applied *useful vs. useless*. As for a concept of *the frivolous* considered in relation to discourse, knowledge production and critique we may look to Jacques Derrida's *Archeology of the Frivolous: Reading Condillac.* Derrida's deconstruction of Condillac's account of the origins of knowledge brings clarity to how the specific structural features that impute to a particular philosophy of knowledge its use and value also,[201] by necessity, circumscribe a role for *the frivolous*. It is at the vulnerable seams of the logic of Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's empirico-linguistic philosophy that Derrida identifies the counter-weaving of what has to be repressed by the functions of that logic, which is to say, for managing what is frivolous and worthless to a discourse on knowledge-making. Perhaps being somewhat frivolous, for the moment at least, I indulge in this play or slippage of logic that entails the frivolous.

On the Origins of *the Frivolous*

In *The Archeology of the Frivolous*: *Reading Condillac*,[202] Derrida conducts an intertextual analysis with 18th century French empiricist philosopher Étienne Bonnot de

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[201] In terms of: contradictions; abysses; and deficiencies.

[202] Written four years after Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, with the use of the word "archeology" (sans the dipthong/ligature "*ae*"), we note Foucault's text as being a possible influence on the title of Derrida's text. Apart from potentially representing a philosophical engagement or perhaps quarrel with Foucault's practice of "arch*ae*ology" as well as his notion of "knowledge" neither Derrida's usage of "archeology" nor his deconstructive reading of what he refers to as the "archeology of the frivolous" appear to, overtly at least, have any affinity nor to be in direct contra-position to Foucault's approach to analyzing the formations of knowledge and

Condillac's various writings in ways that raise questions about how they should be read. Derrida draws on texts by Condillac that range from an anti-Cartesian materialist grounding of epistemology to tracts on commerce and government to an assembly of a dictionary of synonyms.[203] In effect, Derrida looks to trace to the point of their very undoing the intricacies of the logic and language – the very discursive order – by which Condillac's discourse and the constructions of his texts are organized. Derrida takes Condillac's main task to be locating the originating terms for knowledge in the formative elements and workings of language. To this end, Condillac writes,

> The circumstances favourable to the displaying of genius, are always to be come upon in a nation, when the language begins to have fixed principles and a settled standard: such a period is therefore the epocha of great men ... If we recollect that the habit of the imagination and memory depends intirely [sic] on the connexion of ideas, and that the latter is formed by the relation and analogy of sign; we shall be convinced that the less a language abounds in analogous expressions, the less assistance it gives to the memory and the imagination. Therefore it is not at all proper for the exertion or display of talents. It is with language as geometrical figures; they give a new insight into things, and dilate the mind in proportion as they are more perfect. Sir Isaac Newton's extraordinary success was due to choice that had already been made of the signs, together with the

discursive practices. More to the point, "archeology" is restricted to a study of origins whereas, in Foucault's case at least, arch*ae*ology delves into the archival record of past human practices.
[203] The Dictionary was published in 1754.

contrivance of methods and calculation.(Jacques Derrida, *The Archeology*

of the Frivolous: *Reading Condillac*, 66)

Against a tradition steeped in Aristotelian metaphysics, for establishing his Lockean-derived

empiricism, Condillac grounds the forming of our ideas in *the sign*. However, as Derrida

reveals, what Condillac declares to be the conditions that support and perpetuate productive

forms of thinking also leads one to deviate from such. In other words, stemming from the same

organizing mechanisms that give origin to human knowledge emerges the counter-occurring

pursuit of what Condillac declares as the frivolous. Accordingly, in his *Dictionnare des*

synonymes (1751) Condillac defines frivolous as an adjectival variant of *useless* by which, in the

remainder of this text, I accordingly restrict my use of the term. Condillac writes,

> *Useless*: adj. *vain*, *frivolous*, *futile*. Useless is said of things which serve
>
> no purpose, are of no use. If they appear to have some utility but are
>
> fundamentally useless, they are called *vain*. If their utility bears only on
>
> objects of little consideration or worth, they are *frivolous*. As for *futile*, it
>
> adds still more to *frivolous* and is said chiefly of reasoning or arguments
>
> which bear on nothing. (Jacques Derrida, *The Archeology of the Frivolous*:
>
> *Reading Condillac*, p.118)

Actually, Condillac was concerned that frivolity may lurk within his own mode of thinking. He

thus attempts to rationalize misguided degenerative pursuits of "knowledge" as historically

anomalous musings of a few malcontented geniuses.[204] Of course, he did not include himself in

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[204] Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, p.193.

that grouping. Derrida, however, surmises otherwise. Condillac's own discourse for describing regressive pursuits entailing endless repetition of stagnant notions, terms and philosophical propositions of the deviant is not above committing these violations. Derrida contends,

> A philosophy of need – Condillac's – organizes all its discourse with a view to the decision: between the useful and the futile. A philosophy of the sign – Condillac's – always threatens this decision but also expends and multiplies itself in order to reduce the threat, always adds "too many signs" in order to efface the gap or fraction ... Constantly resorting to the values of the same, of analogy, of analysis, of the identical proposition, Condillac had to guard his discourse from frivolity as if from its infinitely alike double. Resembling it, reassembling it, the analog was that positive which produced its negative, the analog of the analog, the useless and vain semblance of discourse, chitchat, the idle tale. Condillac's method consequently consists in indefinitely recharging signs, in saturating semiotics with semantic representation, by including all rhetoric in a metaphorics, by *connecting the signifier*. (JD, 119)

Ironically, by the very mechanisms that Condillac generates a linguistic cleave between *knowledge* and *the frivolous*, Condillac's form of analysis concerning the origin of a positive and productive human knowledge fall victim to the same fate. Here, the very operations of Condillac's analysis of meaningful philosophical pursuits are themselves plagued by a frivolity and deviation from the rules of his semiotic system. His discourse implicates his own linguistic empiricism as actually being formed by what it allegedly stands in opposition to and intends to

elide. As by the turns of reason, and in his defence, we might instead read Condillac most metaphysically: that Condillac's logic is *a priori* and outside of the conditions for the empirical generating of logic. However, as Derrida reads things, to draw that conclusion ignores the productive functions of Condillac's discourse,

> First let us remark the value of the "force of connection." Condillac does not insist on this, but it is an active spring of his discourse. The passage (continuity and/or rupture) from one operation or structure to another and the articulation, then, of their concepts always amount to a difference of force, of the quantity of force. But – such is the universal law of analogy which dominates this whole set of problems – quantity of force is always quantity of connections … Force is first determined as force of connection and its quantity as quantity of connection. What is quantity of connection? Perhaps this question, which Condillac never seems to answer, could guide a deconstructive reading of the *Essay* [*on the Origin of Human Knowledge*]…In this reading, we can ascertain that the system of this articulation or this increase regularly produces a silent explosion of the whole text and introduces a kind of fissure, rather fission, within each concept as well as each statement. (JD, 1980, 72-73)[205]

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[205] Though pointing to breaches in Condillac's system of logic, Derrida is cautious to not portray his own deconstruction as being an abstracted observation (or one that is outside of the text) of Condillac's work. His deconstruction is not to be construed as a methodologically justified "objective reading" of the text; rather, it is also a text that is yet another construction (of the text). Consistently, through repetition of a reflexive tone and strategy, Derrida's account of Condillac's philosophy makes apparent to the reader that they are reading a particular reading, and a particular "writing" of a reading no less. So while explicating the productive functions of

Derrida, in accounting for the generative mechanisms at play in Condillac's discourse, leads us to the point of an unaddressed question: "What is quantity of connection?" He unravels the text to its built-in presuppositions where, in this particular instance, Condillac's discourse can be examined at the point of an oversight, specifically an inattention to what constitutes a concept's formative processes within the generating of analogy or statement on experience. An inexplicable gap within reason occurs. This oversight takes place right at the point that Condillac's discourse inscribes a system of connections between our perception and our articulation of it. For Derrida, this moment of inattention over the specificity concerning a connection's quantitative value (within the formation of new analogues) invites his deconstructive strategy for identifying *the seams* or *divisions* within Condillac's text. The text's implicit limits on reason and method are thus seen to generate their own counter-movement.

In the next section we will see that the very logic of the sign from which knowledge comes into being actually betrays both Condillac's explanation for the emergence of the frivolous and, more importantly, the solid ground upon which Condillac premises the origin of human knowledge. Here though, we may note a parallel between Zielinski's approach to media and Derrida's deconstruction of Condillac. Zielinski deploys an anarchaeological approach to media that exposes media archaeology's presumed discursive ground. Like Derrida's probing of Condillac's premise for the origin of knowledge Zielinski questions: what authorizes the archive as authority and then, in turn, gives authority to the archaeological method? "Technological conditions" are vague, insufficient and yet why are they given such authority? With that said, it

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Condillac's discourse Derrida also reminds the reader that his own text and analytic are always already *of*, one discourse or another.

should be clear, even though Zielinski questions what authorizes systems for knowledge production (even his own formulation of such questioning) he never presumes that there is no authority. Media anarchaeology is not the contradictory proposition of there being a non-authoritative authority. This is quite important for how Zielinski conceives of anarchaeology. Although media archaeology must presume the anarchive as independent of the archive's registry and rule Zielinski does not characterize the "anarchive" as a knowable domain, nor as the archive's opposite. I will expand on how Zielinski keeps his terms so wide open in the next chapter. Further, as we shall see, parallel with how I entertain the formation of the laugh track Zielinski goes against all rationalist based premises for accounting for media. He concedes to a sense of puzzlement as the premise for exploring any medium's rules.

The Frivolous (im)proper

[*The man "of genius"*] *tries a new road. But as every style analogous to the character of the language, and to his own, hath been already used by preceding writers, he has nothing left but to deviate from analogy. Thus in order to be an original, he is obliged to contribute to the ruin of a language… The ease there is in copying their defects, soon persuades men of indifferent capacities, that they shall require the same degree of reputation. Then begins the reign of subtil and*

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strained conceits, of affected antitheses, of specious

paradoxes, of frivolous turns, of far-fetched

expressions, of new-fangled words, and in short of

the jargon of persons whose understandings have

been debauched by bad metaphysics. The public

applauds: frivolous and ridiculous writings, the

beings of the day, are surprisingly multiplied… –

Étienne Bonnot de Condillac [206]

From this excerpt from part II, section I of Condillac's *An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, Derrida declares that for Condillac, "the archeology of the frivolous is this deviation of genius." Periodically straining to think outside of one's nature, language and history, or rather, the arch*aeo*logy proper to it, "the man of genius" attempts to devise original signs and forms of analysis. For Condillac, these forays represent retrograde departures that, in the end, have the unfortunate consequence of laying down fruitless tracks of inquiry that are then pursued by the "impressionable many." Ideally, the man of genius deviates very little, if at all, from the already well-developed semiotic program – specifically of the carefully conceived analogs or sign-chains of meaning – that he inherits.[207] At best, he generates new "turns of expression" that remain

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[206] This is a quote extracted from a footnote in Derrida's *The Archeology of the Frivolous*: *Reading Condillac* (p.68) that directly quotes Condillac's *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*: *Being a Supplement to Mr. Locke's Essay on the Human Understanding*. As the translation for *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (Aarsleff, Hans trans. Cambridge University Press, 2001), which is listed in my bibliography, differs from Derrida's I instead opted to work by the translation of his text.

[207] The man of genius inherits it from the tradition of western philosophical empirical inquiry.

within the set trajectory or bounds of a particular analogical progression.[208] For Condillac, the attempt at being original or giving origin to another form of analogy is simply a hubris-driven perversion of one's language, one that may have destructive implications for the *right* path to knowledge, as it can only get stuck in a dead end. As such, "this deviation of genius" represents the trifling and inconsequential inquiry into a groundless new start – the studious pursuit of the origin, the *arché*, of what is of no use: "the archeology of the frivolous."

For identifying the originating moment of an "absolute impertinence" or frivolity *itself*, Derrida seeks out the mechanisms that must be at work within Condillac's system of signs. We grasp that Condillac is not simply casting aspersions on those "fancy-tongued" elocutionists of his day. Instead there is a structural basis from which the *deviancy* is formed. Derrida writes,

> But under what conditions is frivolity possible? The form of this question lets itself be disintegrated simply by the very semblance of its object. Frivolity consists in being satisfied with tokens. It originates with the sign, or rather with the signifier which, no longer signifying, is no longer a signifier. The empty, void, friable, useless signifier…The sign is *disposability*: if through the imperceptions and the absence of the thing (time) the sign assures our ideal mastery, puts (as Condillac says) "at our disposal," the sign – fragile and empty, frail and futile – can also, immediately, lose the idea, get lost far from the idea, this time, and not only from the thing, from sense and not only from the referent.

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[208] Ibid. p.67

Consequently, the sign remains for nothing, an overabundance exchanged without saying anything, like a token, the excessive relief of a defect: neither merchandise nor money. This frivolity does not accidentally befall the sign. Frivolity is its congenital breach: its *entame*, *archē*, beginning, commandment, its putting in motion and in order – if at least, deviating from itself, frivolity, the sign's disposability, can ever be or present *itself*. Since its structure of deviation prohibits frivolity from being or having an origin, frivolity defies all archeology, condemns it, we could say, to frivolity. (JD, 118-119)

For Condillac, the "useless signifier," that which is detached from the inherent progression of an analog, has lost the function of signifying. Nonetheless, by his thinking, *the sign* is that which is, in its very design as a sign, to be disposed of after use. What is important to grasp here is that built into the very structure of the sign is that it is both "useful" and "useless." Thus, the sign's detachment from an analog does not result from a sign having gone astray. Rather for Condillac, due to what inheres in the structure of the sign, it is actually the very possibility of a sign that a sign is not of use. That it may not have any bearing on things.[209] This means that the "useless" is then a part of 'the structure of the sign' (or more functionally rendered – it is 'the structure of disposability'). In contradiction to the character of *the frivolous, the frivolous* actually has a purpose. So despite his characterization of frivolous as utterly pointless in his *Dictionnare des*

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[209] The structure of the sign is analogous with what occurs with the "deviation of genius." As such, we understand that the "deviation of genius" is not an action that is outside or independent to one's nature, language or history. The deviation is possible because it is a structural feature of analogy. The "man of genius" after "every style analogous to the character of the language, and to his own, hath been already used," or disposed of, can do nothing but deviate.

synonymes, Condillac tells us, the frivolous is the sign's "congenital breach." It is *somehow* generative. It is the birth of a lack, that creates the need for and by which the sign, as that which is *itself* disposability, occurs or has function (that it has use). However, although "the useless" is implicitly assigned a function in the sign's capacity to order and have the powers of signifying (something), Condillac considers "the useless" to have no part in the purposeful process of signifying. Even so, we must take note that regardless of the whereabouts of the useless when a sign signifies, by Condillac's own formulation, it is *the sign's* very structure (the inherent and form-giving mechanism by which a sign can deviate from signifying) that makes *the frivolous* frivolous. In its lack, in its unquantifiable uselessness and impotence, *the frivolous'* potency (its significance with respect to giving form and origin in the structuring of the sign) has to always be nominally factored as being "the useful's" counterpart, as being useless no less.

Derrida, through his reading of Condillac, traces *the frivolous* to being a self-contradicting function of the signifier. He tells us that *the frivolous* is somehow, in its uselessness, of a sign that comes to signify nothing. And that placed outside of, but relative to the useful, *the frivolous* is both by definition useless and, in that it is *of* the *sign*, structurally purposeful (admittedly indeterminately and contradictorily).[210] It is in this sense that I have been exploring the laugh track system of production. As archival formation the laugh track is constituted as a conundrum. Laughter is made purposeful by making useless its being purposeful. To simulate the immediacy of laughter, through the very referencing mechanisms for archiving it, the laugh track makes an artefact of laughter. Which means: to be presented as laughter,

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[210] Here, looking for use in all this: Derrida's deconstructive analysis is highly instructive for reminding us that our philosophical constructions, regardless of their rigor and logicality (and too as with mediatic formations), are not tidy affairs. Rather, they are often entanglements for rationalizing processes of exclusion that are in service of a *logos* or a dominant discourse.

laughter must then already be spent. Within the system of the laugh track's functioning laughter is thereby already put in reserve. Which, in preceding chapters, I have argued follows from the repetitive formation for its reproducing what it already is. More to the point, with respect to Condillac's contradictory account of *the sign*, within the laugh track system, laughter is instrumentalized as useless. Here, laughter in being a tool *is* what's paradoxical. It is uselessness in reserve. More specifically, it is a uselessness of a potential use. Its repeated functioning must always be defunct to be spent again.

Chapter Fourteen: The Un-category of the Frivolous (dubious title)

In the preceding thirteen pages I explored an instance in which uselessness is integral to a philoshophical system of knowledge. As Jacques Derrida accounts for, uselessness is paradoxically central in the originating formation of Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's linguistic empiricism. Accordingly, my idea was to examine both *uselessness'* relation to what is thought to be *useful* and to arrive at some understanding of what *uselessness* might be. For the former, it is unclear that there is a relationship. As to the latter, we are held in check by its contradictory character. Uselessness is implied by Condillac to be an empty signifier – it is without clarification or epistemological verificatory means and yet designates what is entirely without purpose. However, as empty and without purpose, uselessness is a useful signifer. It has the use[211] of pointing to "itself" or a supposed category of the useless as being "useless." So, although marked off and against the "useful," *the frivolous* is paradoxically never entirely *frivolous*. Apart from contradictions or contaminated logic, Derrida also gets us to grapple with the arch*e*ological mechanism by which Condillac formulates the embryonic stages of his linguistic empiricism. Prior to any possibility of cross-pollination, at the origin of the sign, in its structural making and germination to follow, Condillac institutes the *friable* as necessary for there to be any "sign." [212] For Derrida's Condillac, "uselessness" is integral to the formative processes of our linguistic constructions. Whether or not Condillac would agree with Derrida's account is not the concern. Rather what is important, beyond the confines of a linguistic system and for what may be extended to an analysis of media formations, is that "uselessness" is given

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[211] Constatively and performatively.

[212] I emphasize, *the sign* (within the system of signs) is inherently of use and signifies that something is or may be of use.

non-binaric play. Regardless of being a mistake within one's logic, uselessness is part and parcel of the *useful* and visa versa. Here, the intuition for media being contained and having identifiable system operations is pulled at in every direction. We are thus challenged by the extra-ordinary possibility of exploring usefulness beyond the typically use-regulated bounds of a medium's designed purpose. In effect, what's considered useful may, in less positivist terms, be recast within an expanded economy that it is not limited to a medium's utility.

In this chapter I examine the implications of merging usefulness and uselessness for the laugh track as archival formation. Specifically, I focus on how the system's reserve itself may be constituted. I hereby extend my analysis to now explore *how it is* a quantificatory regime and, at the same time, deviates from such. Still, consistent with my analysis so far that the laugh track media formation is a system that paradoxically reserves or archivates, its being a quantificatory mechanism is not a totalizing account. Here, Zielinski's anarchaeology is prescient. Zielinski disrupts the media archaeologist's discursive circuitry that ensures what's seen and said will be productive in describing media formations. But as I stated in Chapter Twelve, his media anarchaeology is not a counter-formation to media archaeology. It is not inversely conceived relative to the strictures of memory nor the generativity of systems. That is, Zielinski does not simply pursue "the forgotten" over "the remembered" nor "the abandoned" instead of "the maintained." Zielinski's anarchaeology is not antagonistic to archaeology so much as it represents an attempt to expand an understanding of media beyond the percieved limits or base coordinates of quantificatory systems. Instead his approach *activates* an anarchegenesis or radical substraction (an indeterminate mathematics) in the make-up of the archive. Certainly, within the archive one may suspect trace formations of what is absent or omitted from the archive. However, Zielinski's subtraction is *not only* a reference to what is missing or excluded

from the archive, rather it is about what eludes the archive. Thus, as with uselessness, we blindly pursue what might never be known nor be a thing of discourse and disclosure.

What of those Fantasies of Emptiness?

... the presence of these blank years in the annalist's account permits us to perceive, by way of contrast, the extent to which narrative strains to produce the effect of having filled in all the gaps, to put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time. In fact, the annalist's account calls up a world in which need is everywhere present, in which scarcity is the rule of existence, and in which all of the possible agencies of satisfaction are lacking, absent, or exist under imminent threat of death. (Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," 15)

As we have seen in previous chapters, having learned from Hayden White, Wolfgang Ernst prompts us to be aware of both the general idea of there being different temporal realities and, more specifically, the specialized archival mechanisms for mediating the perceptions that are set within those realities. He gives the archive pre-eminent powers in guiding our understanding of what comes to surface as discourse and media (even as their own form of archivation). Accordingly, although White makes the point that the annalist's "blank years" may indicate "the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time," Ernst, as we have seen, limits his reading of White's sample of annals as contained, complete, and merely as illustrative of a numeric inventory process. – Ernst makes much of the so-called "blank years" not being quite blank. Precisely, these entries are not simply just a non-meaningful void.[213] The system registry is a marking that permits a *non-entry* corresponding to a number and its system of ordering. The entries reveal a perception of time oriented by numerical succession. In short, for Ernst, there is much order and rule in the annalist's blank or content-less entry. However, in Ernst's media archaeology we have no sense of "fantasy," or at least, nothing of the non-recorded variety – of time wasted or squandered, in short without purpose. Instead, according to his approach to media archaeology, these kinds of archives are complete. Simply, the annalist's "the blank years" is an entry authorized by other systems or systems in the making. It is a form of code and encryption that circulates the procedural traits of a technologized or mechanical design authorizing a subsequent seen and said. But one may ask: why would "the blank years" only register a system's capacity or incapacity for expression? Perhaps, and I speculate that Zielinski might contend, "the blank years" are not so ordered by conventional mechanisms. Rather, in White's examples, code and

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[213] It is uncertain what just being blank might mean. Here, in its emptiest conception, "blank" might be the mark of no mark.

encryption may be less about communication and more about secretive practices, personal fantasy, etc. In effect, there is the possibility that, by other lesser-known or unknown terms, communication is being ex-communicated from these anonymous entries. So even if "the blank years" are telling of a medieval machinery for expression, we need consider that the blanks may then archive or be another kind of archive made of inaccessible, perhaps indecipherable processes. Likewise, Zielinski's variantology is designed to bring focus to these extra-archival possibilities.

In the coming section, we shall work through the potential for discovery that variantology may lead towards. For certain, we are not led to conclusive and definite findings that reinforce a theorized governing technological paradigm. If anything what we learn is that a technological invention reflects what eludes control and use, including the inventive process itself. Accordingly, we are thus prompted to broaden our understanding of the mechanics of the laugh track archive. Although I have accounted for the laugh track as an auto-generative formation the laugh track archive cannot be abstracted from its distinct history and specifically its form of preservation. It is not only a proliferating storage system of mechanical assemblage. That is, the laugh track would not be the reserve it is, it would not preserve as it does, were it not for Charley Douglass' fanatical secrecy. Apart from playing up its mystique as a system of illusion the Laff Box was deemed the official mechanism that consigned laughter to institutionalized confines. In one sense, the Laff Box helped to systematically re-inscribe the value of "spontaneous" visceral response for the broadcast experience. In a more significant sense however, the Laff Box, beyond a preservationist rationale for aiding memory and access to past tracks, kept containment and control of laughs as technically readied for communication. As system of calculation and accrual, the Laff Box thwarted potential ill-timed, ill-toned, inappropriate excessive vocalizing.

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The Laff Box tamed laughter. It was order in a box. Against the threat of perceived unruly audience effusion – presumably an incommunicable *anarchivo-LaffBox*, [214] the Laff Box offered predictability and direction to the broadcast experience.

Flights of the Un-Ergonomic

As already outlined in Chaper Twelve, Zielinski's media (an)arch*ae*ology practices a cross-disciplinal[215] approach he calls "variantology."[216] In a nutshell, variantology permits approaching media in ways that diverge from the singular authoritative vision that conceives of media as platforms of communication or communicable technological formations. Processes of invention are in some way or another influenced by an array of interests, practices and concepts that are not necessarily connected to overarching physical, mechanical and electronic principles of (a medium's) engineering. Archaeologies of media need not be restricted by material findings, or at least what is archived as "researchable material." Thus Zielinski asks us to venture into the murky realm of invention that, apart from being guided by mathematics and machinic operations,

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[214] I borrow the notion anarchive from Jacques Derrida's psychoanalytic reading of the archive in his text *Archive Fever*: *A Freudian Impression*. The notion relies on Sigmund Freud's formulation of how thanotos or the death drive as component of our psychic economy, manifest in an individual's dangerous desire for aggression, gets tamed, gets civilized. For my purposes, the anarchic and anarchival represent violent forces which in some form or another lead to chaos and loss that the archives, in the ordering and giving of foundation to our public and private affairs, are designed to violently frame out.

[215] Effectively, disciplinal violence.

[216] This is in no way to wrestle authorship from the machine. Rather it opposes tidy formulations of media as being predicated on a mathematical-cum-mechanistic conception of "the technological." For Zielinski, media inventions (successful or 'dead in the water', it really doesn't matter) involve processes that may not be documented, scripted or encoded in any form that is sayable, "thinkable" (as prescribed process) and readable.

may also be imbued with a playfulness, which might very well be of an enigmatic poetic order.[217]

Zielinski's form of archaeology pursues the *implicit* aspects of "the seen and said." His findings are oriented by the merely possible and indicate what might have been. For instance, the very form of fantasy for which White's annalist's numbing enumeration records. Accordingly, Zielinski aspires to understand media formations as inventions that are discrete to the point of unknowability. They may have nothing to do with mediating. Rather their formation does not show or tell. In effect, Zielinski's media anarchaeology entertains the possibility of media, of whatever kind, being incommunicable and secretive.

One may question if Zielinski is merely inverting Ernst's account of media archaeology. As a response, Agamben's idea of *gesture* may hold the key to understanding how Zielinski treats incommunicability and the possibilities of "the secret." Agamben's account of *gesture* articulates the experience most proper to our poetic dwelling in language. It brings attention to the lesser-determined, inconclusive, perhaps un-co-optable and fleeting moments that constitute our practices. *Gesture* eludes calculability and points to aspects of our experience that exhibit an indeterminate play of life-forces. Thereby, Agamben declares *gesture* to be a moment in our experience that is uncontaminated,

> *Gesture* is the name of this intersection between life and art, act and power, general and particular, text and execution. It is a moment of life subtracted from the context of individual biography as well as a moment of art subtracted from the neutrality of aesthetics: it is pure praxis. The

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[217] Recall Heidegger (Essay Concerning Technology) who was not referring to poetry but the poetic.

gesture is neither use value nor exchange value, neither biographic

experience nor impersonal event: it is the other side of the commodity that

lets the "crystals of this common social substance" sink into the situation.

(Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without Ends*: *Notes on Politics*, 80)

In this instance, gesture slips the fetters of capitalist instrumentality and sidesteps being rendered a use-function within modern art practice. Instead, by the "crystals of this common social substance," *gesture* materializes the traits of our *linguistic being* so-glimpsed within an un-mediated thrown-ness of unscripted play. Considered more broadly, *gesture*, always as its very own uniquely affective poetic flash, both haunts and breaks the knowable and narrativized space of all human practice. Thus, as with Agamben's notion of pure means, Zielinski's (pure) secrets of media may never be knowable or of any use. Media may thus then be liberated from the media theorist's often assumed programmatic of instrumentalization. That is, media formations, and how they are made secret may forever go undetected, unseen and unsaid. In this respect, "the pure secret" occurs within an unknowable economy of inheritance. We may have something, but we just cannot know.

Here Zielinski's media anarchaeology prompts thinking about what secrets the laugh track archival system might hold. Boiling things down, we may say that the laugh track's potential is always delayed time (the immediacy of laughter is re-stored/held as *a calculus*). It represents, and discretely re-presents as artefact, the potential of the immediate. However, as quantifiable repetitive form the laugh track also unavoidably guts laughter of its guts, its potency. Accordingly, this moment of gutting and cutting (the timing element of mechanisms of assemblage) is not just a productive act of the editor. Assemblage and editing also represents

what is severed from production. These actions represent the irrevocable delayed force of laughter. In step with Zielinski's analysis I would thus argue that this eviscerated laughter is a secreted element within an invention. It is the anarchive of and within the laugh track archive. That is, the void and uselessness that *is* and *of* the laugh track archive is a laugh that can never be quantified. To wit, this *other laugh* of the laugh track is a hidden registry that eludes the gaze of the media archaeologist. It cannot be measured as a frequency and as having a tempulated pulse.

Effectively, Zielinski's media anarchaeology allows for invention to defy registerable and retrievable materio-technological formation. Within any system of invention there is the possibility of incalculable otherness and uselessness integral to the useful, calculable and known.[218] Accordingly, for so many instances of inventions[219] Zielinski permits glimpsing poeticization within the encrypted. Thus we may explore an inventor's various arcane systems more as open-ended artistic inventions than productive quantificatory mechanisms. Sure, they are systems, and likely would have emerged within broader applied media for message-making. However, as I have been arguing for the laugh track and various other media, inventions do not simply aspire to the idealized transparent terms of mathematics or universal systems of communication. Rather, media formations may be approached as having their own equations and communication systems, destined to conceal or render secret.

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[218] Thus, Zielinski resists the form and force of the discursive regimen of media archaeology. He sees past the potent technodeterminist interpretations of Martin Heidegger and Claude Shannon that organizes Kittler's analysis and greatly influences Ernst. In kind, Zielinski reminds us of the play inherent in both Shannon's love of puzzle-making and puzzle-solving and of Heidegger's recasting of *techne* within the incalulable existentiel to and fro of concealing and revealing.

[219] For instance, see Zielinski's accounts of Della Porta, Kirscher and Lombroso in Deep Time *of the* Media.

By exploring a media formation's temporal discreteness in terms of what the archive does not and cannot contain, Zielinski's variantology inspires new discourses on media that both grasps media and puts media at risk of un-predictably being re-invented or re-mediated. Variantology, though a strategic approach to discourse, is also to be reckoned with as a peculiar form of mediation. Accordingly, I speculate that Zielinski's conception of variantology is its *own* secreted formulation. I volley this because, on one hand, he conceives variantology much like an un-writable rule.[220] While on another hand, he advances it as a rule that is necessary for the broader discipline of media archaeology. Perhaps one may conclude, Zielinski's formulation of variantology eludes rule and remains in the dark. – Just like a secret, it has never been formulizable within or by the *arche*, nor within an economy of a knowledge of media.

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[220] By which Foucault gets us to consider the being and becoming of the archive.
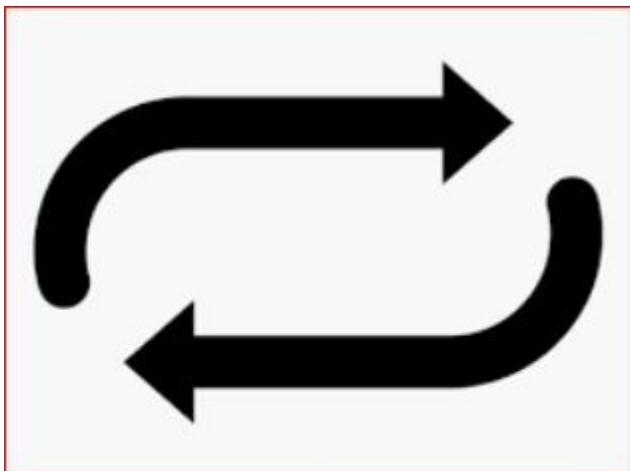
Fig. 3

Appendix: Licenses, Litter, Loops, Laughs, Lineages – a proverbial archive of the proverbial *Laff Box*

Herein, I present an archived packaging of the history of the laugh track, and in particular Charley Douglass' Laff Box. By the strictures of enumerative, descriptive, infrastructural showing of a medium's formation I re-assemble the Archive of American Television's (A.A.T.) archived discussion between interviewer Karen Herman and laugh track audio effects engineer Carroll Pratt (in his Archive of American Television interview). This institutionally mediated archivation of an historical account of the laugh track is structured as a Laff Box designed as its own archive. Yes, an archive of an archive. Here, my idea is to put into play Ernst's reflexive methodology such that the discourse of media archaeology is implicated in the temporal configuration of the laugh track. Simulating the mechanical workings of the Laff Box, the appendix's parts, as if tracks of audio (taken from the interview), are organized, numerically. In parallel to the array of recorded tracks to be accessed by the Laff Box, each track contains the temporal registry of the A.A.T's digitized archival "seen" and "said" moments.

Fig. 4

Descriptive Summary

Karen Herman conducted the interview with Carroll Pratt in Philo, CA on June 12, 2003.

Title: Carol Pratt, Sound Effects Engineer
Date (inclusive): June 12, 2003
Collection number:
Creator: *Pratt, Carrol, 1921-2010*
Extent: 6 part, two-and-a-half hour interview
Abstract: Carroll Pratt talks about his start in feature films at MGM in the sound department. He speaks in great detail about the audience reaction (laugh) machine created by engineer Charley Douglass, for whom Pratt worked after leaving MGM. Pratt describes the device and the types of responses that the machine was capable of doing, from whistles to belly laughs. Pratt describes the updated version of the laugh machine, which he created with his brother John in the 1970s, when he split from Douglass, and started his own company called Sound One. Pratt talks about creating laugh tracks for numerous television series throughout the years (including the longest laugh he ever recorded, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*), until his retirement from Sound One in the mid-'90's. Language: Finding aid is written in English.

Repository: Television Academy Foundation's Archive of American Television, Television Academy Foundation, 5220 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hollywood, CA 91601

Physical location: http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/carroll-pratt

Administrative Information:

Restrictions on Access and Reproduction:
Complete transcripts of most Archive interviews are available for a fee, for research purposes only. Our transcripts have copyright and may be quoted from, with permission.

Biography:

Carroll Pratt was born in Hollywood, California in April 19, 1921. After serving in the US air-force during the 2nd World War he began working as a sound engineer for MGM studios. At MGM Pratt met Charley Douglass, inventor of the analogue tape Laff Box and eventually went to work for him at Douglass' company Northridge Electronics. There Pratt worked on several TV shows such as Leave it to Beaver (CBS, 1957–58; ABC, 1958–63), Dennis the Menace (CBS, 1959–63). Pratt and his brother John while working on shows also helped Douglass build and rebuild equipment. Carroll and John left Northridge Electronics in 1977 forming their own computerized audience response effects company Sound One. Pratt retired from managing Sound One in 1989. He continued to consult with other editors on shows until 1995. At age 89, on November 11, 2010 in Santa Rosa, California Pratt died of natural causes.

Subjects:
Carroll Pratt, 1921- 2010

Genres and Forms of Material:
People

Audio Effects Engineer

Track Fig. 5

Time: Part 1 of 6 parts. 25 minutes, 28 seconds to 25:39

<u>Sayable</u>
Herman: What exactly is a laugh machine?

Pratt: What is the laugh machine?! Whoa, ahh, can we just now and then call it the "audience

reaction machine?" – I've had the laugh machine stigma put on me for so long.

<u>Description</u>

- The audience reaction machine also included whistles, cheers, "uh-ohs" and applause.[221]

Track Time: P1. 23:06 – 23:48

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[221] No doubt a possible precursor to the household hands-free product "The Clapper." It magically synchronized activation of household lights etc. with a single hand clap.

Herman: How did you meet Charley Douglass?

Pratt: I was working at MGM on several shows ... immense box and it was heavy ... all the re-

recording rooms were upstairs ... I felt so sorry and they were terrible stairs too ... when it was

time for Charley I'd usually go down and help carry his box up.

Description

Track Time: P1. 25:08 – 25:19

Sayable
Herman: What was his [Charley Douglass] background in terms of the technology?

Pratt: He was a mechanical engineer who was called during the war (World War II) went into the

navy was called back to Washington to help develop the radar system.

Description

- The object of radar [222] is to overcome unwanted signals (defined as signal to noise ratio

    (SNR)) permitting a military faction (air, land or sea) to focus only on the targets of

    interest or attack.

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[222] In certain respects, Douglass invented a responsive mechanism akin to a radar detection device for locating and isolating laughter (making it a predictable response that live audiences were not able to generate) and thereby ensuring the precisionism of a verisimilitudinous production (of the live broadcast signal).

Track Time: P1. 25:50 – 27:35

<u>Sayable</u>

Pratt: He was working at CBS as a technical director ... There had to be someone bridging those cuts ... He developed primarily a big wooden wheel with a piece of quarter inch tape glued to the outside of it it's about a 328 diameter inch wheel. He glued this tape on that had the recording of laughs of certain sizes and I I believe and this was before my time but I believe it was sort of a medium laugh tape and the wheel would have a key that every time the key was pushed it would go onto one more detent on the wheel so that you got a complete laugh and you'd be ready for the next one ... CBS demanded the machine because it was developed on their time ...

<u>Description</u>

Track Time: P1. 27:40 – 28:22

<u>Sayable</u>

Pratt: Then he built an expansion of that which and it was then a series of magnetic tapes that went across the board from chuckles to belly-laughs to applause to whistles and cheers ...

Herman: Okay, let's stop there to change the tape.

<u>Description</u>

- ⟳ The "Laff Box,"[223] invented by CBS sound engineer Charley Douglass, was

approximately 10 times the size of the squat 6-buttoned box console Jayo Laugher.[224] The

LaffBox's cabinetry, when its doors are open, reveals an elongated typewriter comprised

of 32 keys along with an organ-like foot-pedal that are connected (through a system of

interchangeable spools activated by (key triggered) rod and pulley) up to lengths of

audiotape which retained over 320 pre-recorded laughs (10 separate laughs on each of the

32 tape-loops). The individuated laughs, with tape locations quickly sourced by aid from

an accompanying written registry of descriptions, provided the Laff Box

player/technician with what ostensibly was an infinite number of combinations for

generating a requisite pre-recorded laugh track.[225]

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[223] In the history of popular(ized) mechanical and electronic devices "box" serves as a curious
expression and marketing designate. – Both as ordinary object and as a container for concealing
a machine's (mysterious) operations. To note a few: jukebox, music box, black box, *jack-in-the-box*, *x box* and the slang referent for TV, idiot box.
[224] Oppenheimer was also an inventor. He held several patents covering a variety of devices,
notably including the in-the-lens "teleprompter."
[225] Much of my description of Charley Douglass' Laff Box is borrowed from Rose Kohn
Goldsen on p.69 of *The Show and Tell Machine.*

Fig. 6

Track Part 2. 02:40-03:20

<u>Sayable</u>
Herman: Now, how were those things (laughs) cued for you?

Pratt: Of course, ours were cued by a keyboard ... Originally, we took the platens out of an old Royal typewriter[226] to make each one of the boards and strung them across so that they were in banks of four depending on the sex of the laughs, the size. Is that what you mean how the laughs were cued?

Description

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[226] Connecting the moving-image to the typewriter in the history of films, Kittler in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* observes,

> To the poetic intellect, the unassuming media link of silent film and typewriter, image flow and intertitles, was nothing short of desecration. In order to save the Soul of the Film, Bloem decreed: "Emotion does not reside in the titles; it is not to be spoken, it is to be embodied mimic ally. Yet there are directors who do not shy away from blaring out 'I love you' (the most fiery and tender possibility of this art) in a title." (p.180)

Further, Kittler writes,

> The typewriter became a discursive machine-gun. A technology whose basic action not coincidentally consists of strikes and triggers proceeds in automated and discrete steps, as does ammunitions transport in a revolver and a machine-gun, or celluloid transport in a film projector. (p.191)

To locate the archive Laff Box media-archaeologically does not necessarily mean to find it or supports for it within the reserve of an archive proper. Samples of the laugh track, whether just as laugh track or as track electromagnetically married to other studio recorded programs and documents pertaining to contracts and discussion are there. More so, our digging into the Laff Box as media, as with Kittler's thinking on the kinds of mechanisms (from military to poetic) informing the history of the typewriter, gets us to question regimes of classification. (We may explore the mechanisms of other classification and category, not simply sound recording technology, by looking at other similar mechanisms *vis a vis* carnival toys and casino games (slots), vending machines, even the jukebox. The slot and juke possess the similar mechanical routine as the Laff Box in their mechanical alignment/configuration of moving parts. Further, the jukebox stands as an archive. However, it does not make one, it is not auto-generative.). Disclaimer alert! Incidentally, the Laff Box' history is not its own history. (Of course this might be said of any media). The Laff Box occurs with, by and within other proximate histories that are also their own form of *make-believe* instituted by a pragmatic-minded industry of illusion, of "cheat it" and expediency.

Track **7** P2. 05:02 – 06:39

<u>Sayable</u>
Herman: So how did you know which sounds to use? Were you told or did you look at the film and decide?

Pratt: There many rehearsal for getting these things done ... they got to know you knew business they micro-managed less, less and less ... I started cueing myself with a little laugh inwardly. That would sort come out as a sort of a choke laugh ...You have to lead the joke from the time the brain gets the finger to push the button and the button gets the tape to go you had to anticipate the ending ... and sort of follow your instinct. [227]

<u>Description</u>

Track **8** P2. 08:39 – 09:30

<u>Sayable</u>
Pratt: There are two kinds of comedy shows on television. One is in front of an audience. Which is a multi-camera show ... everything is done in one pass. The whole show is performed like a stage show, in that case you're more or less governed by the audience you listen to ... In the case of single-camera shows which are shot motion picture style, that are shot without an audience and there were multiples of those you had to create an entire audience.

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[227] With respect to Pratt's laughter as an instinctive appropriate response we note that the mechanization of laughter has taken on new forms in which language scientists, through computerized phonetic transcription programs (of laughter), attempt to precisely transcribe the various phonetic formations of laughs.

Description

Track P2. 11:20 – 11:50

Sayable
Pratt: *M*A*S*H* ... in the operating room for example, you would tone way back. You would

play it in just in the chuckling area ... At least one show a season or a couple season they had two

where they didn't have any laughs at all. It was a no laugh show.

Description
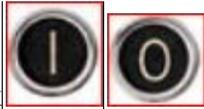
Track P2. 12:24 -13:15

Sayable
Herman: Let's go back to those early years of the audience response machine. Talk a little bit

more about Charley Douglass.

Pratt: I told you more or less about the history and development of the machine ... Charley was

my mentor, my hero and a very kind man and he uh he developed the style ... The first two years

he spent sort of putting me onto, remember we used to have integrated commercials on shows

actually the actors many times would do the commercials on the shows and so he'd put me on

the commercials to get my feet wet.

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<u>Description</u>

Track P2. 16:30 - 16:48

<u>Sayable</u>

Herman: Did you ever have to sign a kind of confidentiality agreement saying you wouldn't

divulge that you were using them [laugh tracks]?

Pratt: No. I can't ever remember being asked to do that. But uh I didn't go around crowing on

about what I was doing or not doing.

<u>Description</u>

Track P2. 16:47 – 17:54

Herman: What about TV critics did they point out when they [laugh machines] were being used?

Pratt: Most of the media people that came and sat in on and saw what was being done realized

the necessity if now that the American public was sort of indoctrinated in laughter ... that you

couldn't cut them off ... Most of the media people that came in or interviewed us or sat in wrote

nice articles.

<u>Description</u>

Track P2. 19:06 - 20:23

<u>Sayable</u>
Herman: What do you think of the purpose of the laugh machine?

Pratt: Back in the *Dennis the Menace* days ... Quite a few houses in Hollywood especially ...
When a show was finished ... They would run it before an audience with some kind of audience
reaction device ... The bad show with the laugh track took head and shoulders over the good
show that didn't have one. So I thought well maybe the people that are watching like the feeling
that they're not alone ... Sitting there by themselves they like to feel that they're just not being
ridiculous and laughing.[228]

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[228] Commenting on the social nature of laughter Ambrose Bierce, in his satirical *The Devil's Dictionary*, defines laughter as,

> Laughter *n.* An interior convulsion, producing a distortion of the features and
> accompanied by inarticulate noises. It is infectious and, though intermittent,
> incurable. Liability to attacks of laughter is one of the characteristics
> distinguishing man from the animals — these being not only inaccessible to the
> provocation of his example, but impregnable to the microbes having original
> jurisdiction in bestowal of the disease. Whether laughter could be imparted to
> animals by inoculation from the human patient is a question that has not been
> answered by experimentation. Dr. Meir Witchell holds that the infectious
> character of laughter is due to the instantaneous fermentation of *sputa* diffused in
> a spray. From this peculiarity he names the disorder *Convulsio spargens.*
> *http://www.thedevilsdictionary.com/?l=#!)*

We also recall Bergson's account that laughter thus serves as a counter-regulating mechanism for
ensuring a semblance of the human and thereby relieving an anxiety that may come to threaten
the certitude of unification and authority necessary for the functioning of a society. Responding
to Bergson's general declaration that for "understanding laughter" "it must have a *social*
signification" the young Georges Bataille, grapples with both the objectifying of laughter as that
which is an event externally determined to the experience of the one that laughs and how in all
seriousness or lack thereof laughter "must not" be a rational construct, and ascribed a *social*
signification.

> The strangest mystery to be found in laughter is attached to the fact that
> we rejoice in something that puts the equilibrium of life in danger

(Georges Bataille, "Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears," *Unfinished System*, 144)

As breach from seriousness and order its affectiveness is inexplicably inaffectual. Laughter, at once, is felt and dissolves the very source and ground of its being felt. A feeling that empties as it feels fulfilling. As Jacques Derrida in addressing Jean Paul Sartre's misread of Bataille puts it: "Laughter is not the negative [of a Hegelian system] because its burst does not maintain itself, is neither linked up to itself nor summarized in a discourse: laughs at the Aufhebung" (p.463, WD, Derrida). Bataille addresses Bergson's giving "isness" as place and design of force to laughter as having a purpose within the frame of the social by questioning from where it emanates and shifting the focus to what laughter does. We see Bataille very much borrows from Friedrich Nietzsche,

> *Epilogue.* But as I finally slowly, slowly paint this gloomy question mark and am still willing to remind my readers of the virtues of reading in the right way – oh, what forgotten and unknown virtues they are! – it strikes me that I hear all around myself most malicious, cheerful, and hobgoblin-like laughter: the spirits of my book are themselves descending upon me, pulling my ears and calling me to order. 'We can't stand it anymore,' they shout; 'stop, stop this raven-black music!' (FN, 247)

In a play on announcing the materio-textual closure of his book *The Gay Science* with, if we are to take *laughter* seriously, the hopeful possibility of being read in other yet-to-be determined ways Nietzsche invokes the auditory beckoning by a particular realm of the spectral. The invisible and haunting forces of the text gather to, through a mixture of laughter, sharply command a rendering of his process of inquiry as final, as identifiable as its *own* self-contained print-production. The *time is up* for this brand of perspectivist analyticity imbued with moro-philosophical reflexive manoeuvring and literary hijinx. Just a few sentences after setting the ghosts'(apparitions') immortalization in print, Nietzsche, in obeyance with their carping laughs, brings *The Gay Science* to its end.

At first blush, Nietzsche's spectralizing of an editorial presence represents an instance in which the source of the editing consortium's grievance, in the form of varied laughter, emanates from outside the body (yes, in the body of the text no less) and in relation to, as direct commentary on, the productive apparatus of which it is a part. Laughter of a particular kind – a textualized kind, though by a certain disciplinal inclination may be characterized as *poetic device*, portends a *pragmatic* resolution to make the text graphically concrete. In one sense, the menacing chortles signal the text as a world unto its own. Not simply an involuntary giggle but well independent of its "author" this passage, among others, is acted on and influenced by *other* forces so inhabiting, driving and generating the logic(s) and language that permits a specific text's or type of book's construction. And, in another sense, the laughs, as editorial collective clamp-down on its wayward author, also sound the final buzzer on a commitment to print – to be submitted as material offering to its destined readers (of whom Nietzsche hopes are

extraordinarily adroit in the art of reading). Again from the *Gay Science*, but this time from the entry that actually heads Nietzsche's text.

> This house is my own and here I dwell, I've never aped nothing from no one and – laugh at each master, mark me well, who at himself has not poked fun. Over my front door. (FN, un-paginated)

Largely governed by the spirits of light feet, joyous song, playful mockery, comic forces and unbridled laughter the text *itself* as if mechanism of a philosophical production and industry, the canon as it were, plays host to running gags dressed in the seriousness of longstanding hard-earned propositions regarding human experience, systems of belief and of understanding. The spirits governing the *Gay Science* cued by each proposition and discursive order permitting its logic expose the reader not to the makings of an alternative critique but to *experiencing* our world anew or at least at a distance from certain authorities. After several pages of jokes, quips and poetic phrasings in the opening section or prelude to Book One of *The Gay Science* Nietzsche, as if reading history as a screenplay, a theatre script no less, introduces the figure of laughter as antedote, a break from and a breaking of a litany of delimiting valuations concerning the "purpose of man's existence." The text reads:

> Foolish and fanciful as his inventions and valuations may be, badly as he may misjudge the course of nature and deny its conditions – and all ethical systems hitherto have been so foolish and contrary to nature that humanity would have perished from every one had it gained power over humanity – all the same! Every time 'the hero' appeared on stage, something new was attained: the gruesome counterpart of laughter, that profound shock that many individuals feel at the thought: 'Yes, living is worth it! Yes, I am worthy of living!" Life and I and you and all of us became *interesting* to ourselves once again for a while. There is no denying that *in the long run* each of these great teachers of a purpose was vanquished by laughter, reason and nature: the brief tragedy always changed and returned into the eternal comedy of existence, and the 'waves of uncountable laughter' – to cite Aeschylus – must in the end also come crashing down on the greatest of these tragedians. Despite all this corrective laughter, human nature on the whole has surely been altered by the recurring emergence of such teachers of the purpose of existence – *it has acquired one additional need*, the need for the repeated appearance of such teachers and such teachings of a 'purpose'. (FN, 28-29)

Routinely, for breaking the authority of rationalist understanding and moral responsibility with laughter, or of what many famous thinkers actively excluded as a dead-end, Nietzsche makes caricature of the western logos respecting philosopher. Notably, Immanuel Kant had asserted: "Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing." (Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* 1911 [1790], First Part, sec. 54, James Creed Meredith (tr.), Oxford: Clarendon Press. Further this conception of laughter as a radical incongruency plays first fiddle in a theory of humor and laughter for philosophers such as Beattie and Schopenhauer (see, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/#IncThe)). Conversely, *The Gay*

Science activates laughter as if it were an undetectable force haunting the positivism of enlightenment rationalism and empiricist thinking. As if, being mediated by his newly purchased Malling Hansen typewriter (as Friedrich Kittler has us attend to Nietzsche's musings on our techno-material conditions or more specifically with his offerings (perhaps those of *The Gay Science*)), "our writing tools are also working on our thoughts." (We must be clear Nietzsche was not advancing techno-determinism but bringing to the fore with this observation that machines among other things may be determining in some fashion how it is we may compose our thoughts. Further this was an observation made prior to the publication of *The Gay Science*.). Instead of, as Kant would have it, a mere by-product of reason leading nowhere Nietzsche gets us to consider laughter as preceding perhaps, at the risk of proposing an absurdist physiological inversion, as somehow actively determining or giving presence and order to the ever-so-serious measurings of a system. (Perhaps as repetitive, in kind, as ordinary factory machines.).
 Systemically, almost making sport of the repetitive structurings of our cosmological theatre, *The Gay Science*, through giving a prominent but varying role to the typically marginalized fleeting "incongruent" feelings of laughter (as there are many kinds of laughter), cracks open epistemological investments and the unquestioned discursive or perspectival order by which they thrive. Laughter, for Nietzsche, represents the playful unruly forces – that feared abyss – against and ironically by which such serious-minded constructs and systems are organized. (This is how Nietzsche, I suspect, very much invigorates a young George Bataille's opposition to Henri Bergson's mechanistic social sanctioning explanation for laughter. Conversely, Bataille conceives of laughter as sovereign to the human understanding so-constrained within prejudices of constructs of morality and systems of beliefs and of thinking in general.). For prefiguring a discourse on the laugh track, that takes it up in terms of how it may be a techno-archival media formation (rather than proscribed by a rationale for it being a media), the unruly laughter of and by which Nietzsche writes – in a sense as performs as divergent perspectives – gives cue to how to explore the laugh track as possible archive(s) of uselessness (not to be confused with meaninglessness).

At one time a figure marginalized with respect to the philosophical canon, Nietzsche has since become often declared, as its founding father, a trope or *nom propre* of the *post-modern*, not to mention as, cheekily declared by Kittler, "the first media theorist." (See Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (p. 79) commenting on a passage on poetry in *The Gay Science*.). At the *grave* risk of further reinforcing this trope and media archaeological lore (Here another trope, no less as "Marshall McNietzsche," intact as the key find of an archaeological dig. It appears for Kittler McNietzsche comes to be seen as authorizing force for his particular formulation of and approach to media. – At least so it goes for his craftily conceived highly influential media piece *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*.) much like the disembodied echoing laughs recycled, reassembled, recorded effectively typed anew per TV production by the cannibalized Royal typewriter activated *Laff Box*, the textual representation of an archive, at its various thresholds, "pushes at buttons" that opens onto registries, perhaps also a pre-programmed operation, for experiencing and thinking what's permitted within our conceptions of and knowledge making apparatuses for media.

Description

Track P2 23:34 – 24:58

Sayable

Herman: Going back to Charley Douglass. He had a reputation for a certain secretiveness about

the work?

Pratt: ... there were two gigantic locks on it [laugh machine] ... I'd have to climb a circular

staircase to go into the woman's room above me at three o'clock in the morning to change the

tracks because he wouldn't allow me to do it in public or even in front of the technician ... At

first I thought this secrecy is a little bit overboard ... maybe it was the underplay intrigue that

made his machine desirable ...

Description

- Laugh monopoly.[229]

Track P2. 26:12 – 30:23

Sayable

Herman: Was there competition in this industry?

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[229] Northridge Electronics appeared to operate by the "black-box" concealment motif for creating
mystique and sense of the magical.

Pratt: Not in the beginning ... competition really didn't start in fact we were my brother and I when we spun off in pursuit of a better way to do it ... sort of catching up with the technology where Charley's was sorta falling behind ... it was time to move up into another area and we became Charley's competition ... Bobby [Charley's son] is now the competition of the company we formed ... there are two new games in town one of the boys does mainly game and some audience reaction shows of specials ... but now with computers, synthesizers its quite easy to pick up an audience record it and replay it.

Herman: In the early days how did you do it? Oh let's stop here to change the tape. Now you know my next question.

Description

 Fig. 7

A hybrid of Douglass' machine, the *Mackenzie Repeater* was used by Hanna-Barbera for its animation productions in the early 70's. Five tapes were loaded into machine and simply played repeatedly.

Track Part 3. 00:20 -1:09

Sayable

Herman: In the early days how did you record your audience?

Pratt: ... We'd get the audience tracks from the show before it was cut before it was assembled and use those with their permission in our library ... the reverberence of the venue and the enthusiasm of the audience was the big part ... we'd use tracks from different series and different shows and different venues and fit them to the shows we were doing.

Description

Track P3. 01:30 – 01:58

Sayable
Herman: How did you get the recording?

Pratt: It was the mixers job or a mixer usually two on an audience show to record the audience itself which had separate microphones and a mic'ed audience.

Description

Track P3. 02:05 -03:14

Sayable
Herman: What made up a good audience reaction?

Pratt: ... they would bring in busloads of seniors from rest homes and seniors centres and didn't

get the humor too well on a lot of the really funny stuff maybe but it must have been too late for

the reaction ... kids who didn't dig the senior attitudes and didn't understand enough of the back

references that were made ... a good audience ... are ready for it.

Description

Track ⑲ P3. 03:43 -04:43

Sayable
Herman: Did you find audience members once and a while hamming it up?

Pratt: Jim Brooks [Producer for *Mary Tyler Moore*] had a very different laugh ... as did Dezi ...

they were right up in front by the cameras and they knew what was coming ... and they'd start

laughing in a very distinct loud laugh on mic that we'd have to usually have the mixer pull down

or cut out of the show because it became too much of a clack.

Description

Track ⑳ P3.05:03 – 05:26

Sayable
Herman: Were there applause signs used?

Pratt: Oh yeah ... and stage managers and stage directors waving for more and more applause all

the and lights that go on and flashing.

<u>Description</u>

<u>Track</u> **2 1**

<u>Track</u> **2 2** P3. 05:26 – 05:55

<u>Sayable</u>

Herman: Did you ever have anything to do with audience warm-ups?

Pratt: Yeah, sometimes ... Some of them were so forced that we didn't get involved in laughing

them up.

<u>Description</u>

<u>Track</u> **2 3** P3. 05:57 – 09:55

<u>Sayable</u>

Herman: Could you elaborate on why you decided to leave Charley Douglass?

Pratt: Magnetic tape had a certain hiss to it and our technology was falling behind ... it started to

be the point when you started to hear the laugh coming in by the hiss ... we [Carroll and his

brother] packed up we were working with an engineer ... he found a new computer device that

would key on for the computer recording and stop recording with a sub-aural tone down around

150 cycle ... using that as a leader between laughs on a small cassette these were on regular

<center>250</center>

cassettes ... we would be able to put on four tracks of laughter of different sizes ... using the leader of the tone we could stop and go in that matter by every time you pressed the key.[230]

Herman: Did your machine play more sounds?

Pratt: Yes, it's capacity was much larger and instead of going in the back room changing tapes ... you'd take out the cassettes that fit the venue and the show and pop in the new cassette. More and more the demand came on space when stereo came in because now you had to double up on everything.

Description

Track P3. 21:01 – 21:58

Sayable
Herman: Were your answers [input on shows] ever incorporated into future shows?

Pratt: Oh Yeah ... To me as a first time audience things weren't apparent ... Sometimes you could say to the assistant producer off to the side ... to make the movements real or called for.

Description

Track Part 4. 01:31-01:55

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[230] In 1977 Carroll and his brother John Pratt formed their own audio effects company, Sound One (of California).

Herman: What kinds of laughs would be in that bank for physical?

Pratt: Sudden square front ends, explosive, punch-lines also get ... when a punch-line blows your mind ... physical always gets explosive stuff.

Description

Track P4. 04:15 - 04:51

Sayable
Herman: Over the course of a series then would a laugh track change depending on what you knew of the characters?

Pratt: I think so ... by the time the series is under way they are prepared for what's coming and they are ready.

Description

Track P4. 11:47 – 13:03

Sayable
Herman: Would you ever get screen credit for your work?

Pratt: ... before I was on the board of governors of the academy technicians had requested that technical credits be given. Prior to that only artistic credits were given – producer, director,

writer and then they enlarged it for musical direction and then technicians started requesting

some time which was good for them to assemble a background and reference and so on ... they

didn't know what to call me ... by special effects or by audience effects, nobody ever used laugh

track ... in the awards that I was fortunate enough to receive I always received it as a part of the

sound crew not as the individual laugh man.

Description

Track ②⑧ P4. 14:33 – 19:57

Sayable

Herman: Is there such a thing as regional laughter? Does a New York audience laugh differently

than a California audience?

Pratt: Canadians like ribald humor ... so it was easy to get explosive laughs ...

Herman: What about within the United States?

Pratt: ... by now television, everyone sees it all over the country and they're exposed to every

feeling if you know what I mean other than the ethnic qualities [differences in laugh] I haven't

seen much ...

Herman: What about shows for international export – did you every have to change a laugh

track?

Pratt: usually when they take out the dialogue track they have to take out everything ... it was a

whole redo ...

<u>Description</u>

Track P4. 23:16 – 23:40

<u>Sayable</u>

Herman: I don't even remember a laugh track on it [*Eight is Enough*].

Pratt: ... when people don't remember the laugh track then you've done your thing right. [231]

<u>Description</u>

- Techniques of seduction

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[231] One may wonder about this type of archival system: Is it more about the memories made or the making of systems that materially unmake, that makes mechanical procedure and history logging materials of a production's by-product? Or is it more about time as material or material as a time apparatus in the form of memory and the making mechanism of memory (which would be a system of archivation that as temporal registry never registers in time as it is always post, always in delay of by-product and reproduction – from the moment of the first tape use to infinite combinations of complex metrics for no track)? The archive laugh track is not in the archive rather the laugh track archive is always archivated without a proper measure of calibration, be it time-wise or as repository. To go into the archive *per se* is to overlook, or rather involves one in an overlooking of the very system that the laugh track (*vis a vis* Laff Box, Jayolaffer, McKenzie Repeater, Phonetic Transcription Device) rules are governed and made by. – It becomes an imitation of storage and reproduction. It is no doubt an Archive and of the archive and archives, but it is always outside and spent prior to the authorizing mechanism of memory aids and management of which the archive is materially ordered. *For certain, an industry procedure, however the industry is also a procedure that is an industry.* The files/documents are always *faux* (a questionable time a quasi time a play on time as counting or ordering or affect and affect of an affect too) they must be so in their very mechanicality and production and system of archivation of a system generating laughs. They are themselves laughable unregisterable documents. Its mechanicity is to follow no rule but it is ruled to only reinforce what it cannot rule, that it cannot rule. Thus, is there any truth to the notion of the documents as *faux*? Is there any truth to the archive laugh track as archive?

Track ③① P4. 24:15 – 24:58

<u>Sayable</u>

Herman: Talking about finding a sympathetic character, is that something you have to look for within the creating the magic of the laugh track?

Pratt: I like to have one sane person in a plot who has, who is lovable and likeable and one you focus on ... if everyone is a rascal it's sort of wearing, you have no sympathy...

<u>Description</u>

Track ③② Part 5. 00:22 – 01:48

<u>Sayable</u>

Herman: Let's focus on the craft of being a sound professional. What are the most important elements of sound design?

Pratt: No longer are people like I was called mixers they're called sound designers ... it's still the same job ... the one thing that is a variable is microphone placement ... it's the only place now where there can be a physical error ... and from that point on it's pretty much taken care of by technology ... the physical act of getting a mic in place to me is one of the most important items...

<u>Description</u>

- Categories of sounds/laughs suggest a preceding discourse, independent of the laugh track as type of sound production. [232]

Track P5. 02:23 – 03:59

<u>Sayable</u>
Herman: Why didn't you like it [digital sound]?

Pratt: Especially at the time I left the business ... there was a falseness at both ends top end and bottom end that was very tiring to work in that the frequencies were not natural frequencies. There were fraudulent frequencies in music especially but now they have methods of improving that enhancing that.

Herman: In your business today do they use digital?
Pratt: Yeah its computer but the original tracks are recorded on digital
Herman: Can you tell the difference?
Pratt: In dialogue not so much once it's gone out into an acoustical situation the ambience of the surrounding sorta swallows its up when its gone directly from synthesized or real music and its right from instrument to recording medium I don't think I can tell it [difference of analog to digital] anymore, of course my hearing isn't what it used to be.

<u>Description</u>

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[232] Kittler, for example, on "noise": "First noise itself had to become an object of scientific research, and discourses "a privileged category of noises." A competition sponsored by the Saint Petersburg Academy of Sciences in 1780 made voiced sounds, and vowels in particular, an object of research, and inaugurated not only speech physiology but also all the experiments involving mechanical language reproduction." (p. 25, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*)

Track P5. 05:08 – 06:11

Herman: What does a re-recordist do?

Pratt: which is now what they call a sound designer who works as I did behind a console and I say it's usually a three man team plus if it needs an audience reaction machine a four man team and they take the original tracks that the recordists have done ... from the live set or the live situation, they're the ones that takes those tracks that are provided and treat them with reverb or with some kind of change of tonality to bring them to match or to restriction of the windows they want be goin through.

Description

Track P5. 09:41 – 11:21

Sayable
Herman: In your early television career did you have to make any kinds of adjustments for the television sets speakers in someone's home?

Pratt: Unfortunately that wasn't our purview ... When I was mixing for television there was an iron clad rule of what they call limiting or compressing ... you can only put so much level loudness on a television transmission and you can only put so low a sound to have it heard so that by the time you finished with what we thought was an acceptable product ... television station ... and be squashed so badly that the producer would come back and say "what about the gun shots you put in they sound like caps gun going off" because all the big gun shots were down to zip and canon shots ... anything where all in this fine range that was reserved for

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dialogue. And then you probably have heard and I have, to the point of distraction working on a

lot of applause shows, that when you hear them on air you hear a pumping of the applause that's

caused by that over-compression. That is done at the TV station at the TV network if you will.

Description
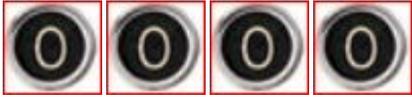
Track P5. 11:23 – 12:26

Sayable
Herman: Did you have to modify your equipment once television went to stereo sound?

Pratt: ... throw out all the old pre-stereo mono ones and go to stereo and in which case took one

track now took two. So it was an expansion yes.

Description

-Track Time: P5. 15:14 – 16:01

Sayable
Herman: How closely did you work with a director?

Pratt: ... in the beginning the director was very involved ... nowadays ... the directors have sort of

backed off and knowing if there is a mistake or something they don't like they can bring it back

or add to it or subtract with it already being recorded.

Description

- Track ⓪ⓞⓞⓞⓞⓞ P5. 16:57 – 17:47

<u>Sayable</u>

Herman: For each show that you did, did you have to take your equipment to the production facility?

Pratt: Yes ... my big problem with Mr. Douglass' machine cos it was a monster ... when we built our machine we built it with that very much in mind ... on all the machines I put trommel wheels ... for distant locations we'd break the machines in half and put the two units in separate travel cases.

<u>Description</u>
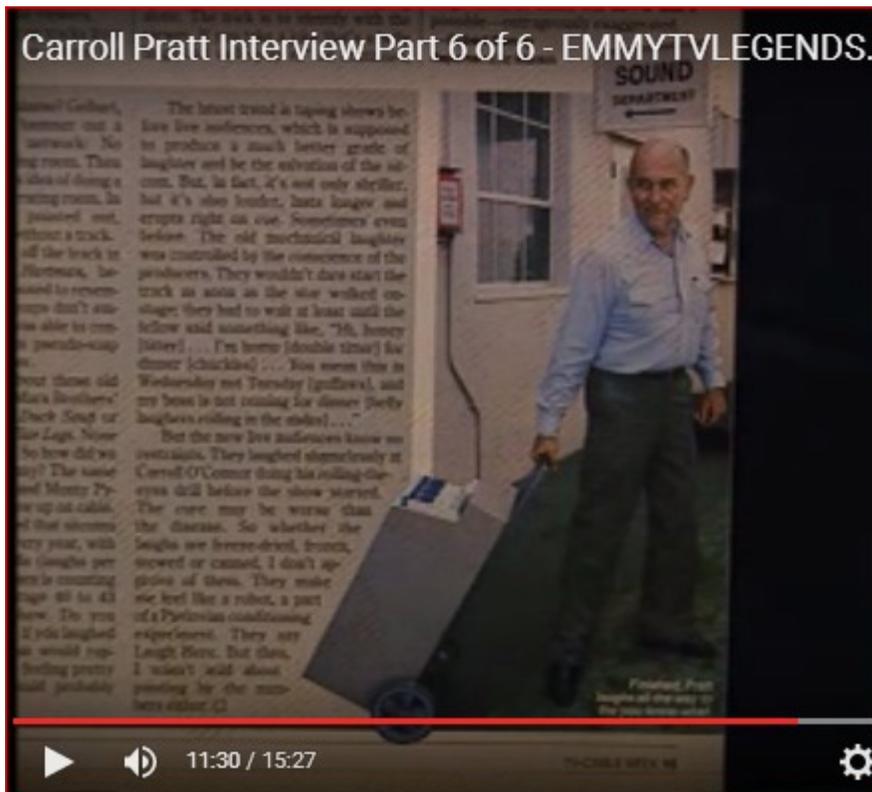
Fig. 8

Track P5. 20:58 – 22:18

Herman: What do you think is your greatest career achievement?

Pratt: ... Charley Douglass who died at 93 having laughed a big part of his career and my having laughed for gee thirty-seven, thirty-nine years I think that laughing is a big achievement that it sort of extends your life, I think. It can't all be genetics.

Description

- Bridging the mechanical.

Track P5. 22:23 – 22:13

Sayable
Herman: How many hours of television do you think you've sat through?

Pratt: I was tryin to add up ... I know that the amount of shows television breaking it into half hour segments (although some are an hour) ... I figured somewhere in the 30,000 total half hours. At that same time in work hours that's astronomical because of working 80 to 100 hour weeks sometimes ...

Description

Track Part 6. 07:56 – 08:55

Herman: Do you think the laugh track will ever become obsolete?[233]

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[233] Seven years after this interview with Pratt, in the same year Pratt died, a scavenger named Mike Molina purchased the Laff Box, along with the various contents of an abandoned locker, from an auction. As the story goes,

"Historic TV Technology Found in Abandoned Storage

Mike Molina makes a Southern California living by selling tools, couches and exercise bikes left behind in defaulted storage units. Professional storage unit buyers travel the circuit, bidding on units and selling off the contents. The buyer's wager is to resell the furniture, tools, clothes and refrigerators at flee markets for twice the cost. Many items are tossed. Unlike the glamour of antique shows, it is dirty work, hauling, haggling and hustling. One joy is the storage industry's version of the treasure hunt. Sometimes, jewelry, money, a painting, memorabilia or a stamp collection hikes the resell value. Rarely, history is discovered in a leather box.

In 2010, Mr. Molina said he surveyed a unit before auction and saw a music amplifier. He has had success reselling gear to musicians so he was high bidder at $650. He spent two weeks selling and trashing the contents before returning to the amplifier. His first impression, and second, didn't divulge the extraordinary find. Mr. Molina told me, "The next time I looked at it, I was going to throw it away because it looked like a broken typewriter. But as I looked at the personal journal, I suspected something more was going on." The paperwork revealed his rediscovery of television audio technology history abandoned in an Anaheim, CA storage unit.

Mr. Molina's gamble enabled him to tell a remarkable work story to his wife and three small children. He uncovered Charlie Douglass' 1953 "Laff Box," the one-of-a-kind device heard on 1950 sitcoms including Bewitched, The Munsters, Get Smart, M*A*S*H, The Beverly Hillbillies – and many sitcoms and movies since. Mr. Molina took it to a June 2010 episode of the Antiques Roadshow where expert appraiser Gary Sohmers was astonished that it had been abandoned. On the air from San Diego, Mr. Sohmers appraised it at $10,000. Mr. Molina has received several offers for the device, but has bigger plans.

Mounting a coup d'état on 1950s, TV and film canned audio technology, Mr. Molina attended Don Presley's June 25-26, 2011 sale of exquisite antiques and fine art. Mike walked away with the "Jayo Laugher" invented by I Love Lucy's legendary producer Jess Oppenheimer. Douglass and Oppenheimer were locked in a patent battle in 1953 which Douglass won. Douglass cornered the laugh track business for the next two decades while Oppenheimer focused on his Emmy Award winning show, whose hilarious housewife headlined the most watched show in the United States at its peak.

Pratt: ... I don't think it [the laugh track] will because it is much cheaper to film a stage type

comedy ... with an audience. The audience being the driving force for the characters and all and

that will always take at least technical enhancement by a machine ... script torn asunder so that

has to be put back together and the laugh machine has to bridge its way in.

Description

Mr. Molina has grown his collection of canned guffaws and belly laughs to include an early prototype built by Charlie's son Robert who continues the family tradition from his company Northridge Electronics. Improving upon his father's invention, Robert invested heavily into modernizing components, especially the storage mechanism. He introduced what is probably the first use of computer hard drives dedicated to TV audio production. By then, the Laff Box was no longer the only prerecorded audio affects TV audiences enjoyed.

George Lucas' Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope (1977) convinced Toon Town's titans that CGI was profitable and Tron (1982) revolutionized the TV and motion picture visual effects industry, proving that technology had caught up with scriptwriter fantasies. Lighting, audio and film are technologies of higher and broader significance, but the Laff Box and Jayo Laugher eliminated the requirement for a live audience, pioneering the era of producing the entire celluloid on a closed lot.

This marks the first time all three iconic sound devices have one owner. Mr. Molina's collection is unsurpassed in TV laugh track history."

http://eggvan.com/historic-tv-technology-found-in-abandoned-storage/
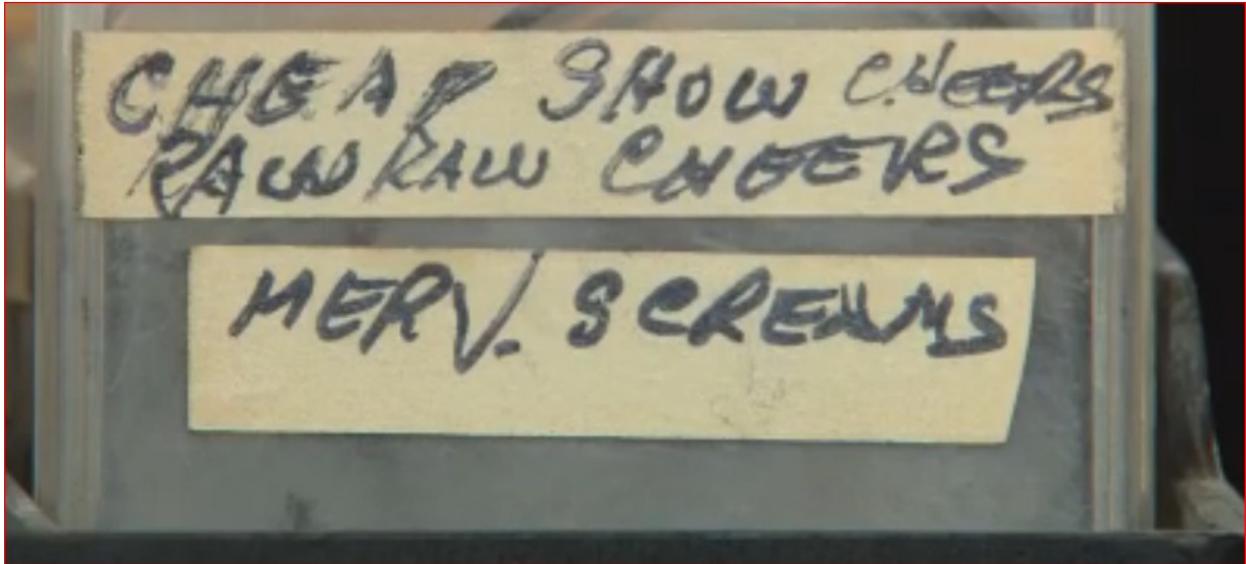
Fig. 9
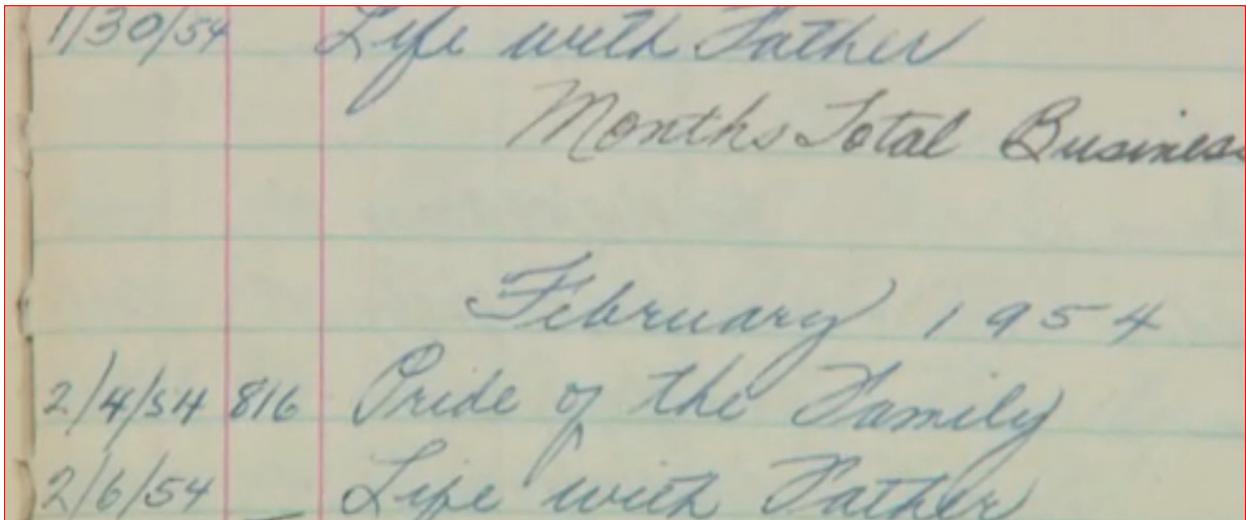
Fig. 10

Fig. 11

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