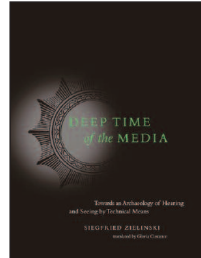
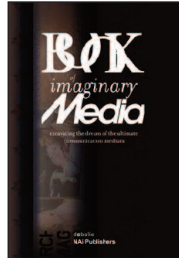
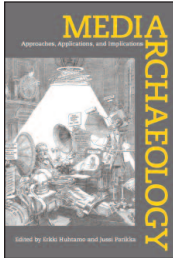


Review Essay

Understanding Media Archaeology

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Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications. Edited by Erkki Huhtamo & Jussi Parikka. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011. 366 pp. ISBN 9780520262737. **Book of Imaginary Media: Excavating the Dream of the Ultimate Communication Medium.** Edited by Eric Kluitenberg. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2006. 296 pp. ISBN 9789056625399. **Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means.** By Siegfried Zielinski. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006. 386 pp. ISBN 9780262240499.

In an interview published in 2006, the German cultural historian Friedrich Kittler admitted that, “as an approach to the social history of technical media it took me a long time to understand what the term media archaeology means” (quoted in Armitage, 2006, p. 32). Kittler, who is often listed among the fathers of media archaeology, had probably not been alone in his troubles to comprehend the precise sense and scope of media archaeology. In fact, given the varied approaches taken by scholars who worked under this label and the different ways it has been defined, providing a clear and definite account of media archaeology is a rather difficult task.

Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications, a collection of essays published by University of California Press, therefore has the merit to provide some order in a field whose contributions to contemporary media studies are strongly influential, but often vague and ambiguous. Featuring contributions from several of the main intellectual figures on the international scene—including Erik Kluitenberg, Thomas Elsaesser, and Wolfgang Ernst—this is perhaps the most comprehensive book on this field ever published in English. Moreover, editors Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi

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Parikka's introduction is a worthwhile effort to provide a synthetic and clear account of the main outcomes, the inspirational sources, and the history of media archaeology.

The word "archaeology" has had a singular appeal in the fields of media and cultural history, especially but not exclusively in regard to visual media such as photography and film. As Huhtamo and Parikka accurately note, the roots of media archaeology should be located within two distinct traditions. On one side, media archaeologists often referred this wording to Michel Foucault's notion of the archaeology of knowledge (Foucault, 1972). On the other side, the term "archaeology" has been frequently used, at least since the 1960s, in the field of film studies. In this context, authors such as C. W. Ceram (1965), Jacques Perriault (1981), and, more recently, Laurent Mannoni (1995), proposed the "archaeology of cinema" as a kind of prehistory of the medium, pointing to philosophical toys, techniques of projections, photographic technologies, and illusions of movements that preceded the advent of film.

In the past decade, the term has become ubiquitous in media studies. Scholars have struggled to apply it to the most dissimilar subjects, proposing—to give but a few examples—an archaeology of compositing (Manovich, 2002), an archaeology of television (Müller, 2000), or an archaeology of peep media (Huhtamo, 2006), and employing different methodologies and theoretical frameworks. In this sense, there is not just one "media archaeology," but several of them: different authors who have been working under this umbrella have developed substantially different versions of it.

But how can we make sense of all the different versions of media archaeology? A convenient way to do it is to consider some of the most influential works in the field and see what they have in common. For this purpose, it might be useful to take into account two other books that have powerfully contributed to the adoption of media archaeological frameworks in the Anglophone academy: Siegfried Zielinski's *Deep Time of the Media*, translated from German in 2006 by the MIT Press, and *Book of Imaginary Media*, edited by Eric Kluitenberg for NAI Publishers and published in both Dutch and English in 2006.¹

Zielinski's *Deep Time of the Media*, published for the first time in German in 2002, is for several reasons a very peculiar book. The reader will be surprised to find out that the book has not only one, but two introductions. Although both of them focus on methodological and theoretical issues, the first one (which is the only one that the author explicitly calls "introduction") explains the notion of the "deep time of the media," and the second one clarifies Zielinski's own approach to the archaeology of media, which he names "anarchaeology."

The discussion of the concept of "deep time" moves around a critique of the idea of technical progress and of a history of technology that tells the comforting fable of a universal driving force. As Zielinski put it: "[T]he history of the media is not the product of a predictable and necessary advance from primitive to complex apparatus. The current state of the art does not necessarily represent the best possible state" (p. 7). According to Zielinski, instead of looking for progressive trends in the history of media, historians should be able to discover individual variations and qualitative turning points. Such an approach is described by Zielinski by drawing on concepts developed not so much within archaeology, but rather within geology and paleontology. In these

fields, the idea of “deep time” was linked to the discovery that “the Earth’s evolution was not a linear process, but a dynamic cycle of erosion, deposition, consolidation, and uplifting before erosion starts the cycle anew” (p. 4). In paleontology, this discovery implied the refusal of a notion of progress from simple to complex forms of life, substituting it with an idea of time in which a successive reduction, and increase incrementation in the diversity of species, takes place. Following from this perspective, the archaeology of media should also focus on the attempt to recognize the crucial moments in the history of technology. To Zielinski, the importance of such moments, which he calls “windows” or “cuts,” is usually understated because of the genealogical and linear approach employed by most historians of media.

The second central concept that drives Zielinski’s approach is the notion of *anarchaeology*. The use of this term is based on the fact that the etymological roots of archaeology encompass the word *archos*, which in Ancient Greek means “leader.” If *anarchos* is then “the absence of a leader,” *anarchaeology* is an approach to history that refuses to identify a primary, standardized set of objects for analysis, reserving “the option to gallop off at a tangent, to be wildly enthusiastic, and, at the same time, to criticize what needs to be criticized” (p. 27). In Zielinski’s view, by opening the spectrum of potential objects and paths, the historian of media will need to accept the risk of unsuccessful searches, but will be rewarded by unexpected—and thus particularly precious—finds.

Zielinski’s book carries the reader in a somehow anarchic but fascinating journey into the history of communications, where Empedocles’ theory of pores is interpreted as a theory of the perfect interface; Della Porta’s explorations in optics and cryptography reveal a particular configuration of magic, science, and technology; and Cesare Lombroso’s anthropology of the criminal makes technical means into instruments of measure and metaphors for the human body. Such wandering in the “anarchaeology” of media is made even more enjoyable and interesting by the numerous, beautiful illustrations and captions—an alternative path that the reader follows throughout the text.

Book of Imaginary Media, a collection of essays edited by Eric Kluitenberg, belongs to the recent tradition of literature in media history that explores the connections between communications media and the imaginary.² This version of media archaeology questions the emergence of expectations, fantasies, and fears about technology. Paraphrasing Benedict Anderson’s famous claim that communities are in part real and in part imagined (Anderson, 1983), Kluitenberg argues in his introduction to this collection that media are “partly real and partly imagined,” too. As a consequence, communications media should be considered not only technological devices, but also “compensatory machines,” sites onto which various types of irrational desires are projected. According to Kluitenberg, historians should struggle to document not only the technical history of media, but also the uncertain paths of human inspirations, which are frequently connected to the ideation and production of technical artifacts.³

Despite a certain vagueness of its claims, Kluitenberg’s project of “the archaeology of imaginary media” has been extremely influential in recent media studies. Embracing non-existing media that were imagined by futurologists and science fiction writers, speculations about existing technologies, and cultural desires connected to the devel-

opment of communications media, this is a flexible and tempting framework for scholars addressing the issue of what Carolyn Marvin called “media fantasies” (1988, p. 7). However, some of the questions raised by Kluitenberg are left unresolved in the book he edited. In particular, despite his suggestion that the intent of his work is to understand the way the imaginary quality of media affects their actual development, the question of how such feedback between technology and imagination actually takes place is not convincingly answered in this context.

What do Zielinski’s and Kluitenberg’s media archaeologies have in common? Arguably, three main aspects in these books can help to make sense of the efforts of media archaeology altogether. The first aspect is the refusal of the notion of linear progress. Most media archaeologists share Zielinski’s and Kluitenberg’s conviction that historians of media must abandon ideas of linear development from less to more sophisticated technologies. This is explicitly stated by Zielinski and mentioned also by Kluitenberg, who notes that “dead” media and failed—or even non-existent—technologies are as relevant to the history of media as the ones that are universally adopted.

The second aspect is the emphasis given to recovering the meaning of episodes and facts in the history of media that are usually disregarded. This is also connected to the refusal of linear progress: in a history that is not regarded as a development toward further levels of complexity and perfection, the difference between the margins and the centre is virtually imperceptible. The gaze of media archaeologists upon the development of media technologies should be as open as possible, in order to grasp the significance of historical evidences that are usually disregarded. As a consequence, media archaeology has been particularly fertile in exploring issues such as the imaginary of media, the invention of artifacts that were potentially alternative to more successful technologies, or the anticipations of future media, discourses, and practices.

The third aspect is a substantial methodological anarchy, which is often characteristic of the work of media archaeologists. In Zielinski, who alludes to anarchy in his neologism “anarchaeology,” this methodological anarchy is expressed through an explicit and deliberate call for a history that does not fear to wander in an inspired exploration of the richness of media culture.

Given such heterogeneity of methods, Huhtamo and Parikka’s collection is an important attempt at theoretical reorganization for media archaeology, whose influence, lacking a solid framework, otherwise risks remaining ephemeral. Despite their impressive attempt at synthesis and self-definition, however, the book confirms the impression that media archaeology should be regarded as quite a heterogeneous set of instruments and inspirations to be used by historians of media, rather than as a coherent theory about the development and history of media technologies. In fact, the problem of media archaeology’s variety of approaches and definitions is explicitly acknowledged by editors Huhtamo and Parikka, who choose not to “nail down ‘correct’ principles or methodological guidelines or to mark fixed boundaries for a new discipline” (p. 2). Instead of positing an orthodoxy, they prefer to realize an open forum for different voices. This is probably the most appropriate and representative solution for a book on media archaeology. However, this choice also brings some risks: by merging media archaeology with a wide range of perspectives in contemporary media his-

tory, one ultimately risks losing the significance of this approach—as when you dilute a small amount of salt in a much too large pot of water.

Notes

1. Although it has recently been largely influential in English-speaking scholarship, media archaeology is indebted to the work of European intellectuals, particularly from Germany, the Netherlands, and Northern Europe. Taking into account the context of its development is essential to comprehending its ends and means. In particular, the German-speaking tradition of scholarship brought to this field some important characteristics: its strong focus on theoretical concerns; its antiquarian vocation, manifested in media archaeology through the attention to “dead” or obsolete media and artifacts; and, last but not least, the leading role that archaeology *tout court* has had in German culture since the nineteenth century.
2. See, among others, Sturken, Thomas, & Ball-Rokeach (2004), Sconce (2000), Andriopoulos (2008), and Flichy (2007).
3. Kluitenberg’s proposal for an “archaeology of imaginary media” is also illustrated in the chapter he authored for Huhtamo and Parikka’s *Media Archaeology*. See Kluitenberg (2011).

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