

Media Archaeology: Where Film History, Media Art, and New Media (Can) Meet¹

Wanda Strauven

INTRODUCTION: MADMAN OR BUSINESSMAN?

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For a long time, talking to oneself on the street or in any other public place was considered abnormal, deviant from the expected social norm. Singing on your own was okay, but talking on your own, without having any interlocutor, was simply weird. When taken unawares by a fellow citizen in such an odd situation, a possible and often-spontaneous reaction (which I have indeed caught myself in several times) was to quickly shift from talking to singing, as if to imply: don't worry, I was not talking to myself, I was just singing. Today people talk, or even shout, to themselves all the time on the street – while walking, cycling, or driving their car – often making great gestures to accompany their words. It has become an accepted social behavior because of the existence (and our knowledge of the existence) of the hands-free mobile phone. We know that these people who seem to be talking or shouting to themselves might have an (invisible, distant) interlocutor.

In a memorial piece on 9/11 written a year after the tragic attacks on the WTC Towers in Manhattan, Thomas Elsaesser narrates how this specific change in (acceptance of) human behavior blurs the distinction between a crazy vagabond and a busy entrepreneur. When he encounters two such men on Rembrandt Square in Amsterdam – both gesturing and talking to themselves, the former out of despair, the latter in the midst of a conference call – Elsaesser comes to the conclusion that the businessman's phone with its hands-free device has made the behavior of the homeless man normal. In other words, new media do have an impact on our notion of (social) "normality" (2003: 120).

This striking – and, in Elsaesser's own words, "comical and even heartless" – comparison made me think, in a somewhat twisted way, of Michel Fou-

cault's archaeology of knowledge as first explored in his PhD dissertation on the history of madness, *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1965, originally published in French in 1961). Instead of asking who is normal/abnormal as in the "comical" scene above, Foucault tries to capture madness as an object of knowledge through time, or rather how madness, as an object of knowledge, is constituted differently in different times, in order to understand the conditions of (and reasons for) exclusion of mad people.

60 | If mad people were sent away with the ship of fools in the Middle Ages, it was because they were regarded as dangerous for society; madness was believed to be contagious, comparable to leprosy. During the Renaissance, however, the fools were accepted again in society because they were seen as privileged beings in that they were (too) close to God. The 17th century is the period of the "Great Confinement," when the insane were considered unreasonable and were locked away and institutionalized. In the 18th century, fools were, because of their lack of reason, considered to be animals and were therefore treated as such. With the rise of Romanticism, the fascination for mad people returned, this time not because of their proximity to God, but because of their closeness to nature and their rebellion against society and civilization; the fool was regarded as a hero. Finally, in the 19th century, society considered fools to be mentally ill people who needed to be cured, which led to the modern (and still reigning) episteme.

As José Barchilon observes in the introduction to *Madness and Civilization*: "Rather than to review historically the concept of madness, [Foucault] has chosen to recreate, mostly from original documents, mental illness, folly, and unreason as they must have existed in their time, place, and proper social perspective. In a sense, he has tried to re-create the negative part of the concept, that which has disappeared under the retroactive influence of present-day ideas and the passage of time" (Foucault, 1988: v). In other words, in order to constitute "madness" as an object of knowledge, one should not only ask the question "what is madness?" but also "when is madness?"; that is, study "madness" in its historical context, in its radically different discursive formations that succeed one another through time. This is the beginning of Foucault's intellectual excavation of the human sciences, which he explores further in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970, originally published in French in 1961), followed by *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972, originally published in French in 1969).

NEW FILM HISTORY'S TRIPLE AGENDA

Like “madness” as an object of knowledge changes over time, so do the media. Exemplary in this respect is the history of cinema. During the 20th century, each decennium seems to have “produced” its own form or definition of cinema. As we know, the cinema around 1900 differed radically from the cinema in the 1950s or the cinema of today, not only on a textual level (what kind of films are we watching), but also on the levels of the basic apparatus (different cameras used to produce the films) and the *dispositif* or viewing situation (from the fairground to the drive-in, from the multiplexes to our mobile phone). Thus, in order to define the cinema, we should not only ask the Bazinian question (“what is cinema?”), but also the temporal/historical one (“when is cinema?”). As Elsaesser observes, we should try to “identify the conditions of possibility of cinema ... alongside its ontology,” since the cinema is still to be invented, or rather: it is reinvented all the time (2004: 103).

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Recently, Malte Hagener has added the locative question (“where is cinema?”), pointing out the apparent impossibility to grasp the cinema of today as an object of knowledge and therefore to locate it, not only metaphorically but also very physically. Cinema has become too instable, too fluid, and too malleable. Its locations are multiple: Internet, DVDs, WiFi, mobile phone, gallery spaces, museums, arcades, YouTube, etc. Hagener observes: “Cinema is in fact ubiquitous, it is everywhere and nowhere at the same time” (2008: 16). Cinema’s ubiquity is linked by Hagener to the Deleuzian concept of immanence, to the idea that our perception and our thinking have become cinematic, that the cinema is part of us. Elsaesser, who is not quoted by Hagener in this respect, conceives of this cinematic ubiquity as a return to ontology, or ontologization of the cinema, a project that aims to define cinema no longer in its medium specificity, but as an experience, as a “particular way of being-in-the-world” (Unpublished paper). Ideally, this should lead to the combination of the *what*, the *when*, and the *where*.

Already in the 1980s these three questions were addressed, albeit separately, by the Early Cinema movement set in motion by the 1978 FIAF conference, which took place in Brighton, UK.² Part of this legendary conference was the symposium “Cinema 1900-1906” which was prepared by an archival project known as the Brighton Project, which consisted in looking afresh at all surviving examples of pre-1906 cinema (preserved in some fifteen FIAF archives and surpassing the amount of 550 films). This screening, which literally opened the eyes of a new generation of film scholars (among whom Tom Gunning, Charles Musser, and André Gaudreault), signaled the beginning of the New Film History. Whereas this moment is often defined as the “historical turn” of cinema studies, I would like to highlight the triple agenda of these early cin-

ema scholars that, to a certain extent, reflects the three questions discussed above and that has become essential for the emergence of media archaeology: attention for the otherness of the early cinema (“what”), discovery of the multiple origins of early cinema (“when”), and the study of its contextual material (“where”).

The Brighton Project led to the discovery of early cinema as an “other” cinema, that is, *not* as an immature form of narrative cinema, or as a preparation of classical cinema, but as a cinema with its own intrinsic values or tropes, such as frontality, acknowledgement of the camera’s presence, overlapping editing or repetition of the key action, etc. From the desire (or necessity) to mark the distinction between early cinema and narrative cinema, a terminological debate emerged with, for instance, Noël Burch opposing the “primitive mode of representation” to the “institutional mode of representation” and André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning proposing the opposition between the “system of monstrative attractions” and the “system of narrative integration” (Burch, 1984; Gaudreault and Gunning, 1989).

Important to stress here is that the ontological agenda of early cinema scholars implies a rupture (or epistemic break) between early cinema and narrative cinema. At the same time this means a questioning of the rupture between “pre-cinema” (pre-1895) and “cinema” (post-1895) as canonized by traditional film history, since for many reasons early cinema belongs to what is called pre-cinema rather than to cinema. In other words, the “what” question inevitably has consequences for the “when” question: when does early cinema start and when does it end? Along with issues of periodization, there is also the “historical doubt about the origins of cinema” (Hagener, 2008: 16) and the discovery of so many forgotten pioneers which led to the dismantlement of the myth of the “firsts.” The 19th century proved to be very fertile for film historians and film archaeologists alike.³ More recently, as we will see below, this search into time or academic time traveling has been pushed into “deep time” by someone like Siegfried Zielinski.

With the Brighton Project kicking off New Film History, the otherness of early cinema was initially studied from a formal or aesthetical point of view. Very rapidly, however, this early cinema movement shifted from textual analysis to a (quantitative) non-text approach. As Ian Christie observed: “... crucially, what began as a movement to study these [pre-1906] films empirically – to look at them as archaeological objects – soon became an exploration of their context – of production, circulation and reception – and thus necessarily a study of what *no longer existed* – namely the vast bulk of these film texts and their places and modes of screening” (2006: 66). This contextual strand of New Film History should be seen in relation to the movement of New Historicism, which developed in the 1980s in the field of literary studies and which was grounded

in contextual analysis and the study of non-literary texts. Likewise, the aim of New Film History became the study of non-filmic texts, of contextual material, of socio-economical data, etc. (Allen and Gomery, 1985; Maltby, 2006). A new discipline emerged: *cinema history*, that is, the history of cinema as institution, as exhibition practice, as social space (as opposed to *film history*, which is, generally speaking, a history of masters and masterpieces).

Even if originally not limited to early cinema studies, New Film History soon became more or less synonymous with it (Elsaesser, 1986). Today it is still a valuable and applicable model not only for the study of early cinema but also for other periods in film history and not only for film but also for other forms of media (see Strauven 2006). Furthermore, it inspired (early) film scholars to question the dominance of the visual in film studies, and explore untouched or underexplored domains, such as the sound(s) of early cinema (see among others: Altman, 2004; Lastra, 2000; Wedel, 2004) and the sense of touch in relation to early and pre-cinematic screen practices (see among others: Strauven, 2011; Wedel, 2009). New Film History's relevance lies precisely in its (pioneering) media-archaeological approaches, which range from questioning what is taken for granted or accepted as "truth" to digging up forgotten pioneers, unimportant films and other neglected material or dimensions. Most significant, undoubtedly, has been New Film History's contribution to historical methodology, by challenging or even severely criticizing the methods of traditional historiography such as chronology, genealogy, and especially teleology. Or, more generally, it profoundly changed the attitude of the (media) historian, who should always study the past with genuine wonder: this is the principle of media archaeology as a "hermeneutics of astonishment," as Elsaesser, paraphrasing Gunning, has phrased it (2004: 113).

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MEDIA ARCHAEOLOGIES, OR THE THREE BRANCHES OF MEDIA ARCHAEOLOGY

The main question remains, however, whether media archaeology is indeed (merely) a methodology. Interestingly enough, the various practitioners of the field – those who call themselves media archaeologists – do not agree upon what to call media archaeology: is it an approach, a model, a project, an exercise, a perspective, or a discipline? Is media archaeology a subdiscipline in media studies (to be distinguished from media archaeology as subdiscipline in archaeology) or is it rather a "nomadic enterprise," as Jussi Parikka has defined it, and therefore a "traveling concept" (following Mieke Bal), which crosses various disciplines (Hertz and Parikka, 2010: 5)? According to Parikka, media archaeology should be seen as a hybrid discipline, which results in interdisciplinary work. Can media archaeology then still be defined as a school

with its proper set of tools, methods, etc.? As we will see below, there are different methodological schools. But even beyond (or next to) the methodological issue there is the very basic tension between practice and theory: whereas some media archaeologists like Siegfried Zielinski consider it as a very practical activity (comparable with the fieldwork of “real” archaeologists), for others like Thomas Elsaesser, it is rather a metaphor or a conceptual model.

Before discussing these various differences in methodology, it is important to point out that media archaeology made its way into at least three distinct fields (within the larger field of media studies), which I propose here to call the three “branches” of media archaeology: 1) film history/media history, 2) media art, and 3) new media theory. These three branches are historically grown layers, successive phases that continue to coexist over time.⁴ For a proper “archaeology” of media archaeology, one could evoke several attempts of alternative historiographies undertaken in the first half of the 20th century (for instance by Walter Benjamin in his unfinished *Arcades Project* and by Dolf Sternberger in his *Panorama of the Nineteenth Century*) (Huhtamo and Parikka, 2011: 6-7). My overview aims at mapping the nascent field and will therefore be limited to the last three decades, since the emergence of media archaeology until its (still ongoing) development as a self-proclaimed discipline, with its own set of problems, body of methods, etc.

In the 1980s, media archaeology emerged, as already sketched above, as part of cinema studies, more specifically *early* cinema studies. Even if, in those years, the early cinema movement did not consciously embrace (or promote) a media-archaeological approach, it is worthy to remember that Thomas Elsaesser, who also coined the term “New Film History,” used the term “Media Archaeology” in the title of his introduction to *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative*. This volume, published in 1990, wanted to reflect on the legacy of the 1978 FIAF conference and stressed the importance of a “systematic account of early cinema” as precondition for a “cultural archaeology of the new medium” (Elsaesser, 1990: 1). Other pioneering publications to be mentioned here are Jacques Perriault’s *Mémoires de l’ombre et du son: Une archéologie de l’audio-visuel* (1981) and Laurent Mannoni’s *Le grand art de la lumière et de l’ombre: Archéologie du cinéma* (1994).⁵

Since the 1990s, the first branch of media archaeology developed in broader terms as media history. On the one hand, this development led to excavations of hidden, forgotten, and imaginary media, as for instance in Bruce Sterling’s Dead Media Project founded in 1996 and the symposium “An Archaeology of Imaginary Media” organized by Eric Kluitenberg at De Balie, Amsterdam, in February 2004. On the other hand, media archaeology became synonymous with (historical) reading against the grain, a tendency that is most obvious in Zielinski’s anarchic form of archaeology or “anarchaeology” which wants

“to escape monopolisation by the predominant media discourse” (1999: 9). Such an enterprise, still somewhat implicit in Zielinski’s *Audiovisions: Cinema and Television as Entr’actes in History* (1999, originally published in German in 1989), resulted in the extraordinary time-traveling *Deep Time of the Media. Towards an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (2006, originally published in German in 2002), wherein he discovers the unknown or little studied work of other against-the-grain media thinkers, such as Empedocles (6th-5th centuries BC), Giovan Battista della Porta (16th century), Athanasius Kircher (17th century), Johann Wilhelm Ritter (late 18th century), Cesare Lombroso (19th century), and Aleksej Kapitanovich Gatev (20th century), to name just some key figures of *Deep Time*.

Zielinski’s work permits one to make a bridge between the first and the second branch of media archaeology in that his historical quest seems to be driven by his admiration for radical contemporary media artists, “those among the avant-garde of electronics in whose heads and hands the new techniques do not become independent ends in themselves, but are constantly irritated and reflected upon: artists like Valie Export, David Larcher, Nam June Paik, Steina and Woody Vasulka, or Peter Weibel” (1999: 22). Yet it has been especially the Finnish scholar Erkki Huhtamo who put on the map the second branch of media archaeology, turning his attention to a slightly different group of media artists. In his essay “Resurrecting the Technological Past. An Introduction to the Archeology of Media Art,” Huhtamo discusses the artworks of Paul De Marinis, Ken Feingold, Lynn Herschman, Perry Hoberman, Michael Naimark, Catherine Richards, and Jill Scott, among others, as examples of a media-archaeological practice consisting in “incorporat[ing] explicit references to old analogue and mechanical machines” (1995). According to Huhtamo this media-archaeological tendency in the arts world has become manifest since the 1990s, but it was already announced during the 1980s by the work of media artists such as Jeffrey Shaw and Toshio Iwai. There are various ways in which media-archaeologically inclined artists (or “artist-archaeologists”) engage with the technological past, ranging from explicit remakes of old apparatuses to more subtle displacements or hybrid constructions of past and present. As example of the latter, Huhtamo cites, for instance, Paul DeMarinis’s *The Edison Effect* (1989-1993) that brings together three different ages of sound technologies (mechanical, electronic, and digital), combining an Edison phonograph with vinyl discs and laser beams. To illustrate the more straightforward strategy of the remake, Huhtamo mentions Catherine Richards’s interactive installation *The Virtual Body* (1993) which can be classified as a “peep-show machine” (Huhtamo, 1995). Another nice example of an explicit remake that comes to mind in this context is Julien Maire’s high-tech update of the old-fashioned (and obsolete) slide projector, which he construct-

ed for the installation *Demi-Pas* (*Half Step*, 2002). Typical of Maire's work is the creation of highly original (and technically complex) prototypes by which he engages not only with technology's past but also with its future(s). This artistic time traveling often takes the form of a performance that partly reveals, partly mystifies the operation of the prototypes to an audience of "astonished" museum visitors – a new art form that Edwin Carels has proposed to call "cinema of contraptions" (2012).

66 | If artist-archaeologists seem to share the common goal of "resurrecting the technological past" (which is also, at least partly, shared by scholars who are media-archaeologically inclined), this does not necessarily mean, as Huhtamo points out, that their work explicitly evokes the "old tech," but instead it might use "a contemporary technology as both the terrain and the tool for media archaeological excavation" (Huhtamo, 1995). Such a strategy of (historical) displacement becomes even clearer – as Garnet Hertz and Jussi Parikka discuss in their *CTheory* interview on the "archaeologies of media art" – in the more recent strand of media-archaeological art that "relates to hardware hacking, circuit bending and literally opening up media technologies to reveal the complex wirings through which the time-critical processes of contemporary culture function" (2010: 8). Especially interesting in this respect is the electronic do-it-yourself (DIY) practice of circuit bending, which consists in dismantling, unwiring, and rewiring electronic devices (from battery-powered children's toys to MP3 players) in order to create new (musical) instruments. Such a DIY movement not only relates to historical practices of reuse, in particular the Cubist collage and the Dadaist ready-made, but also and especially counters the high-tech industry of Silicon Valley (with its planned obsolescence) (Hertz and Parikka, 2012). Furthermore, it points to a fundamental difference between scholarly and artistic work, which Hertz and Parikka discuss in terms of layers: while the textual medium is still rather limited to linearity (and therefore narrativity), the artistic (DIY) approach allows more directly for an excavation into multiple layers, turning media archaeology into a real activity, something that "needs to be executed, not constructed as a narrative" (2010: 8).

The idea of media archaeology as a concrete activity, as a material engagement with (technological) devices or apparatuses, is key to understanding how this originally historical enterprise has become attractive to new media studies. Since the beginning of the 21st century, we see that several scholars have started to adopt media archaeology as a method for a (literal, physical) excavation into contemporary media. What is at stake in these projects is not only the questioning of the newness of new media, but also and especially the "exploration of the potentialities of media," or more generally the "dis- and replacement of the concept of media" (Hertz and Parikka, 2010: 6). This

third branch of media archaeology is expanding itself in different new fields of analysis, such as software studies (Fuller, 2008), (digital) media ecology, which includes studies on issues such as “materialist energies” (Fuller, 2005), digital waste (Sterne, 2007), and computer viruses (Parikka, 2007); and – last but not least – Wolfgang Ernst’s take on media archaeology called “operative diagrammatics,” which promotes a non-representational approach, using the (Peircian) diagram as its epistemological tool. By opposing the notion of mapping to the “media-archaeological idea of the diagram,” Ernst clearly favors the latter as it is “conceptual rather than visual, topological rather than geographical, non-narrative (data-based) rather than narrative, connective rather than spatial, concerned with code (software) rather than images, numbers rather than sensual perception”; and, therefore, he proposes to “redeem the notion of ‘mapping’ from the cartographic metaphor and instead remathematize it” (2005: 6).

In an interview with Geert Lovink, Ernst explains the mathematical dimension of media archaeology in relation to the archival numerability: “Media archaeology describes the non-discursive practices specified in the elements of the techno-cultural archive. Media archaeology is confronted with Cartesian objects, which are mathematizable things, and let us not forget that Alan Turing conceived the computer in 1937 basically as a machine paper (the most classical archival carrier)” (Lovink, 2003). Ernst’s approach is a good example of material(ist) media archaeology, which focuses on the operative level of the media, that is, the processuality. Rather than a historical project, “operative diagrammatics” is about “creating such situations where you get into contact with media in [their] radical operability and temporality” (Parikka, 2009). According to Parikka, such a take on media archaeology is “a-historical, even unhistorical perhaps” (2009). However, in a previous phase of his career, Ernst carried out a truly Foucauldian project, “an archaeology of the technological conditions of the sayable and thinkable in culture,” which did not exclude excavation into ancient Greece and its rhetorical techniques (Lovink, 2003; Ernst, 2000). As we will see below, Ernst can be counted among the most Foucauldian media archaeologists.

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RETHINKING TEMPORALITIES

As diverse as these three branches of media archaeology might seem, their agendas share at least four important aspects. Firstly, there is the crucial relation between history and theory. The historical dimension is also present in the third branch, most explicitly when the newness of new media is questioned and more subtly when their potentialities are at stake. In media archaeological

terms, history is the study not only of the past, but also of the (potential) present and the possible futures. A second common ground of the three branches is the vital connection between research and art, between researchers and artists. While this interrelation is most obvious in the second branch, it should be remembered that at the very origins of New Film History there was the (re)discovery of early cinema by avant-garde filmmakers such as Ken Jacobs, Stan Brakhage, and Noël Burch, and documentary film editor Dai Vaughan. For the new media branch, media archaeology seems to have become essential to methods of design, which is the area *par excellence* where research and art meet. Here we should mention again Garnet Hertz, who is a faculty member of the Media Design Program at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California and who is developing a theory of DIY. A third aspect I would like to briefly underline is the central role played by the archive, ranging from the FIAF film archives (Brighton project) to the archives as “cybernetic entities” in the digital age, as defined by Wolfgang Ernst (Lovink, 2003).⁶ Lastly, and most importantly, what the three branches of media archaeology have in common is a rethinking of temporalities. This brings me back, finally, to the methodological issue upon which I touched in the first part of this chapter. Since the way these temporalities are rethought differs, often to a great extent, from school to school.

Indeed, media archaeology, rather than being one school, consists of various schools, not only in terms of (trans)national borders,⁷ but also and especially in terms of methodology. To simplify the rather complex picture of a discipline that is still in formation, I identify four dominant approaches for the media-archaeological project of rethinking temporalities; it concerns four different, sometimes opposite approaches adopted by key figures of the field, which consist in seeking: 1) the old in the new; 2) the new in the old; 3) recurring *topoi*; or 4) ruptures and discontinuities. In the remainder of this chapter, I will briefly discuss these four approaches, by highlighting, where possible and relevant, the connection with Foucault’s work, in particular his “archaeology of knowledge.” As we know, Foucault himself did not include the (audiovisual) media in his archaeological approach. One could say that media archaeology starts where Foucault’s analyses end. But then, as Friedrich Kittler reminds us, “writing itself, before it ends up in the libraries, is a communication medium, the technology of which the archaeologist simply forgot” (1999: 5). Therefore, Kittler’s technologically determined media history could be considered anti-Foucauldian, even if Kittler is also often seen as the spiritual father of media archaeology, precisely for this very same reason. Kittler’s influence can especially be felt in media-archaeological studies that stress the materiality of the media, and somehow crosses the four approaches that I will now discuss separately.

1. The Old in the New: From Obsolescence to Remediation

The first approach of seeking the old in the new is directly inherited from Marshall McLuhan and his law of obsolescence, according to which old media become the content of newer media and, thus, lose their initial novelty and effectiveness, without being eliminated, however. As famously formulated in *Understanding Media*: “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph” (McLuhan, 1964: 23-24). This quote also appears in Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s study on remediation that, not accidentally, carries the subtitle *Understanding New Media* (2000: 45). Although not overtly promoted as a media-archaeological concept, the principle of remediation is often taken for granted in recent media historical research and therefore needs to be addressed here. According to Bolter and Grusin’s own definition, the notion refers to the “formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms” (2000: 273) – television remediated film that remediated photography that remediated painting, and so on.

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In their opening chapter, Bolter and Grusin proclaim being indebted to Foucault, more particularly for their notion of genealogy, as they are “looking for historical affiliations or resonances and not for origins” (2000: 21, note 1). Foucault’s genealogy is a Nietzschean genealogy, which should be clearly distinguished from the traditional genealogy or study of family trees, generally adopted by (classical) historiographers who are in search of the origin of things.⁸ Foucault’s genealogy is not concerned with the pure origin, but with multiple origins and contingencies. It is complimentary to his archaeological project in that it tries to understand or grasp the contingencies that made happen the shift from one way of thinking to another, from one episteme to the next.⁹

Despite their openly acknowledged Foucauldian inspiration, one might have reservations about Bolter and Grusin’s method, as it inevitably implies a historical linearity, resulting in an equally inevitable media convergence. According to Zielinski, this is indeed not the appropriate way to do media history: “In [this] perspective, history is the promise of continuity and a celebration of the continual march of progress in the name of humankind. Everything has already been around, only in a less elaborate form; one needs only to look” (2006: 3). Zielinski does not explicitly refer to Bolter and Grusin’s work, but he makes his point clear by stating that Michelangelo’s ceiling paintings in the Sistine Chapel have nothing to do with today’s VR applications and CAVEs.

2. The New in the Old: Anarchaeology or Variantology

To the approach of seeking the old in the new, Zielinski opposes his “anarchic” form of media archaeology which he provocatively (or ironically?) calls *anarchaeology*. Zielinski seeks (or rather hits upon) the new (“something new”) in the old. (2006: 3) He literally digs into the “deep time” of media, going all the way back, as seen above, to the 6th and 5th centuries BC to the life and work of Empedocles. The notion of “deep time,” borrowed from the vulcanist James Hutton, refers to geological time and its measurement by analyzing strata of different rock formations. What is crucial for Zielinski’s conception of media archaeology is that these strata do not form perfect horizontal layers one on top of the other, but instead present intrusions, changes of direction, etc.¹⁰

70 | Zielinski’s media-archaeological approach is inspired by the science of paleontology, which teaches us that the “notion of continuous progress from lower to higher, from simple to complex, must be abandoned, together with all the images, metaphors and iconography that have been – and still are – used to describe progress” (2006: 5). The study of our geological past tells us that there were moments when “a considerable *reduction* of diversity occurred” (2006: 5-6; italics added); thus, instead of a continuous increasing of complexity, the evolution of nature (including humankind) sometimes takes a step back. This is also true for our media history: according to Zielinski, the “history of media is not the product of a predictable and necessary advance from primitive to complex apparatus,” which means that the “current state of the art does not necessarily represent the best possible state” (2006: 7).

The anarchic approach adopted by Zielinski does not only consist in reversing the McLuhanian thinking but also, more generally, in countering the “monopolisation by the predominant media discourse” (cf. supra). In his essay “Media Archaeology,” published ten years earlier in *CTheory*, Zielinski already emphasized that he did not try to “homogenize or universalize the historic development of the media” but instead to think and write it “hetero-logically” (1996). In the same essay, Zielinski also stated that media archaeology needs to be seen as a “form of activity”, in the Wittgensteinian sense of *Tätigkeit* (“philosophy is not a doctrine it is an activity”). This confirms the above-quoted remark that media archaeology “needs to be executed, not constructed as a narrative.” Here it is interesting to note that Zielinski is not only reading old original manuscripts, but also going to the sites (as a true archaeologist), following the footsteps of his heroes (2006: 37-38).

Zielinski’s history can best be described as a study of singularities, which tries to capture the event “in the exact specificity of its occurrence,” as Foucault prescribes it in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*: “we must grasp the statement [*l’énoncé*] in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of

existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes" (2007: 30-31). Zielinski's ultimate goal is to collect or put together a large "body of individual anarchaeological studies" which would constitute a "variantology of the media," a media history as a labyrinth consisting of innumerable individual variations (2006: 7).

3. Recurring *Topoi*: The Eternal Cycle of the Déjà Vu

The third dominant approach of media archaeology is the cyclical view proposed and practiced by Erkki Huhtamo. This method is inspired by the work of the literary scholar Ernst Robert Curtius, who in his *Europäische Literatur und lateinische Mittelalter* (1948) tried to explain the internal life of literary traditions by means of the concept *topos*. Deriving from the Greek word for place, a *topos* is a (literary) convention or commonplace. Media archaeology, then, becomes in Huhtamo's words the "way of studying the typical and commonplace in media history – the phenomena that (re)appear and disappear and reappear over and over again and somehow transcend specific historical context" (1996: 300). The result of such an approach is media history as a succession (or eternal return) of media clichés or commonplace views concerning (new) media, technology and their uses. Unlike Curtius who explains the (re) appearance of certain *topoi* by having recourse to Jungian archetypes, Huhtamo stresses that these commonplaces are "always cultural, and thus ideological, constructs." And he adds: "In the era of commercial and industrial media culture it is increasingly important to note that *topoi* can be consciously activated, and ideologically and commercially exploited" (1996: 301). In other words, the (media) industry with its advertisement strategies and other means of communication also plays an important role in this cyclical mechanism, insofar as it can bring to the surface old dreams of annulling time and space as well as old anxieties about the (supernatural) power of media technologies.

This return of both optimistic and pessimistic commonplaces is at the core of Huhtamo's media-archaeological project, which looks back into the past from the perspective of the present and wants to explain what Tom Gunning described some years earlier as "an uncanny sense of *déjà vu*" (1991: 185). Approaching the end of the 20th century, Gunning registers a same kind of mixture of anxiety and optimism around new technologies as Freud observed at the end of the previous century, when the telephone was bridging the distance between family members or friends who were separated from one another by other technologies of modernity, such as the railway or ocean liners. Besides this ambivalent effect of technology, the idea of returning *topos* can also be

applied to more aesthetical or stylistic issues. Here we can think of Gunning's own concept of cinema of attractions, which was dominant in the early days of cinema and then went underground to reappear in a mitigated form in the "Spielberg-Lucas-Coppola cinema of effects" (Gunning, 1990: 61).

Typical media motifs that can be examined following Huhtamo's approach are, for instance, the visceral impact of special effects (from the phantasmagoria to digital 3D), the family as unit for media consumption (from the stereoscope to the television), the courting and therefore distracted spectator (from the kaleidoscope to the *cinématographe*), and so on. While investigating recurring *topoi*, Huhtamo excavates not only neglected and forgotten media, but also, in a somehow Foucauldian vein, the discourses in which these media emerge. Yet Huhtamo is not aiming at a Foucauldian study of discursive formations. His concept of "discursive objects" is closer to the notion of imaginary media, that is, media that did not really exist but were fantasized about in (written or drawn) discourses. A good example of such a discursive object is the observiscope, a fantasy device of the 1910s based on the technologies of the magic lantern, the phonograph, and the telephone, among other things, and destined to return as *topos* at the end of the century in the form of the webcam, video chatting and conferencing, etc.¹¹

In Huhtamo's own words, his media-archaeological approach "emphasizes cyclical rather than chronological development, recurrence rather than unique innovation" (1996: 303). However, even if not chronological, such a cyclical view inevitably leads to a linear reconstitution of (media) history, implying not only returns but also "obscure continuities," in a similar fashion as does the history of ideas to which Foucault precisely opposes his "archaeology of knowledge" (Foucault, 2007: 154). By the way, Huhtamo is fully aware of his anti-Foucauldian penchant when he states that his approach is "actually closer to the field characterized by Foucault somewhat *contemptuously* as the history of ideas" (1996: 302; emphasis added).

4. Ruptures and Discontinuities: Foucault's Legacy

In his (new) film history as media archaeology, Elsaesser has been quite sceptical about the cyclical view, more specifically about the return of the "cinema of attractions". He warns us against making "too easy an analogy between 'early' and 'postclassical' cinema" since it might "sacrifice historical distinctions in favor of polemical intent"; for instance, by overemphasizing the attraction principle of contemporary feature films in terms of a return to the origins, one might forget about the important role played by television's commercial breaks in the development of (post-classical) narrative cinema (2004: 101).

A media-archaeological approach means, according to Elsaesser, that we constantly revise our “historiographic premises, by taking in the discontinuities, the so-called dead-ends, and by taking seriously the possibility of the astonishing otherness of the past” (2005: 20). This is the general idea behind a “hermeneutics of astonishment” discussed above; a way of interpreting the past while being astonished by its otherness, instead of looking at it with some preformed present-day ideas. Furthermore, *the* past does not exist; it is always a construction, a selection among many pasts that actually existed or might have existed. Or, as Elsaesser puts it: “History as archaeology ... knows and acknowledges that only a presumption of discontinuity (in Foucault’s terms, the positing of epistemic breaks) and of fragmentation (the rhetorical figure of the synecdoche or the *pars pro toto*) can give the present access to the past, which is always no more than a past (among many actual or possible ones)” (2004: 103). Likewise, Ernst refers to Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge and his notion of rupture or epistemic break: “The archaeology of knowledge, as we have learned from Foucault, deals with discontinuities, gaps and absences, silence and ruptures, in opposition to historical discourse, which privileges the notion of continuity in order to re-affirm the possibility of subjectivity” (Lovink, 2003).

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Whereas Elsaesser’s media archaeology can be considered a very general critique of film history as linear development, “either in form of a chronological-organic model (e.g. childhood-maturity-decline and renewal), a chronological-teleological model (the move to ‘greater and greater realism’), or the alternating swings of the pendulum between (outdoor) realism and (studio-produced) fantasy” (2004: 80), Ernst sees media archaeology as “a critique of media history in the narrative mode” (Lovink, 2003). According to Ernst, media historians should stop telling (media) stories – but he immediately confesses that he, himself, sometimes slips back into it. Possible alternatives to this narrativization of (media) history could be databases, collages, websites (such as Thomas Weynants’s *Early Visual Media*), or image libraries (such as Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne*). Maybe, after all, the artist-archaeologists are the (only) ones who can really dismantle the linear and narrative modes of media history?

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE MEDIA ARTIST...

Not only does the artistic approach facilitate a multilayered excavation into time and space more easily than scholarly writing; generally speaking, the media artist also operates in direct, physical contact with the medium or, even better, with its materiality. Therefore, the media artist can dig into the

technological past as well as in the potentialities of old and new media more straightforwardly than a (traditional) media historian. The media artist then becomes an example that the new media historian, or media archaeologist, might wish to follow, even if his/her academic toolbox and framework do not “allow” him/her to do so.

In a certain sense, media artists are (already) free enough to “describe the interplay of relations within [the Foucauldian statement] and outside it” as a proper archaeology of knowledge requires (Foucault, 2007: 32). They are free from academic boundaries, disciplinary conventions, and methodological restrictions. The various media-archaeological approaches discussed above in opposition to one another (seeking the old in the new vs. finding the new in the old, studying recurring *topoi* vs. emphasizing discontinuities) can freely be combined in one and the same artwork, or body of artworks.

74 | Media artists, finally, operate more easily (or more spontaneously) in the “real” world to make their fellow citizens aware or even critical about media uses in daily life. A nice example to conclude with is Daniel Jolliffe’s mobile sculpture *One Free Minute*, which consists of a huge yellow scone on wheels with a red phonograph horn mounted on top of it. The sculpture contains a cell phone to which people can make calls that are broadcast from the horn: calls are limited to one minute, one free minute of “anonymous public speech.”¹² As a popular counterpart, we might think of the UK comedian Dom Joly who in the 1990s disrupted various public places (restaurants, libraries, silent train compartments, art galleries, etc.) by making loud calls with his ridiculously giant mobile phone, a sketch that bluntly “underscor[ed] the incongruity of the private conversation publicly performed” (Hemment, 2005: 33). What both “performances” have in common is that they make very visible the mobile phone or its apparatus, which according to my opening anecdote tends to disappear from our visual field. But, like my opening anecdote, it is all about questioning the impact of new media technologies on our social behavior by recreating such situations in which this impact can be amplified and therefore criticized. It is media history in practice.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Thomas Elsaesser for his constructive feedback on an early version of this text.
- 2 FIAF stands for *Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film* (International Federation of Film Archives).
- 3 Film archaeologists should be distinguished from media archaeologists in that they are mostly interested in devices classifiable as “pre-cinematic” and may be less driven by a Foucauldian notion of archaeology. A good example of a film archaeologist is Laurent Mannoni who, in the early 1990s, published an “archaeology of cinema” based on extensive archival research (cf. *infra*). One can also think of the collector Werner Nekes and his archaeological film series *Media Magica* (1986-1996).
- 4 In his blog *Cartographies of Media Archaeology*, Jussi Parikka quite similarly identifies the existence of various historical layers. However, he adds a first layer consisting of the work of Walter Benjamin and more generally early 20th century German media theory. Thereafter he lists three layers since the 1980s which differ slightly from my three branches: 1) new historicism and cinema studies; 2) imaginary media research, variantology, and excavations of hidden and forgotten media; and 3) media theory (2010).
- 5 In their introduction to *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka also refer to C.W. Ceram’s *Archaeology of the Cinema* (1965) which they consider as a counter-example: despite the title of his book, Ceram adopts a rather traditional historical approach which is positivistic in scope (2011: 4).
- 6 See also chapter 4 in this book.
- 7 Besides the Finnish scholars Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (both working outside Finland, in the US and the UK, respectively), there is a strong presence of German scholars who can very schematically be divided between the “Berlin School of Media Studies” and the “Amsterdam School of Media Archaeology” (founded by Thomas Elsaesser and adhered to by scholars of various nationalities, among whom myself). With the risk of generalizing, the Berlin School is marked by a Kittlerian legacy of materialist media studies, whereas the Amsterdam School is driven by early cinema studies. For the Dutch context, one should also add the Imaginary Media project undertaken outside the strict academic institution by Eric Kluitenberg. In the US, media archaeology is also being practiced and taught at various universities by new media scholars such as Alexander Galloway (NYU) and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (Brown University).
- 8 A good example of this old-school practice is the genealogy of cinema, where different 19th-century families such as persistence of vision, photography and projection, are brought together to “give birth” to the first Lumière show of moving images.

- 9 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to give a full account of Foucault's genealogical period, which started with *Discipline and Punish* (1975, translated in 1977) and continued with *The History of Sexuality* (1976, translated in 1977). Since the 1970s, Foucault focused his work on the position of the subject and the complex power relations at work in society. However, archaeology and genealogy should not be seen as two separate and incompatible methods; they are rather two sides of the same coin. Or, as Foucault put it: "Genealogy defined the target and aim of the work. Archaeology indicates the field in order to do genealogy" (1983).
- 10 From the perspective of art history, Georges Didi-Huberman (2000) comes to similar conclusions by considering the image an anachronism, a (temporal) instance where past and present are intermingled. In such an anachronistic, non-linear conception of time, the notion of *montage* is fundamental – as Didi-Huberman further develops in his more recent writings and his reading of, for instance, Harun Farocki's work (2010).
- 76 | 11 For more details on the observiscope, see Huhtamo's caption of the 1911 *Life* illustration "We'll All Be Happy Then" (1996: 296).
- 12 I would like to thank Tina Bastajian for pointing out this artwork to me. For more information about its live and site-specific versions, see <http://www.danieljolliffe.ca/ofm/ofm.htm#>.

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