

## What is Media Archaeology?

**Review Number:** 1343

**Publish date:** Thursday, 1 November, 2012

**Author:** Jussi Parikka

**ISBN:** 9780745650265

**Date of Publication:** 2012

**Price:** £15.99

**Pages:** 200pp.

**Publisher:** Polity Press

**Place of Publication:** London

**Reviewer:** Scott Anthony

Firing off ideas and arguments in all directions, Jussi Parikka's *What is Media Archaeology?* is an exciting and excitable contribution to cultural theory. The book begins by outlining the strands of historical and cultural enquiry, as well as the artistic practices, that currently constitute what he terms 'media archaeology'. But as Parikka explains, not everyone he describes as practising it would think of themselves in the same way. This uncertainty is indicative. Media archaeology proves to be a term that it is not easy to define concisely.

Media archaeology's most tangible roots are in film history. Tom Gunning's attempts to understand early forms of cinema on their own terms, rather than as mere staging posts on the path towards classic Hollywood cinema, led to the characterisation of the vital and hybrid forms of early cinema that drew large numbers of people to fairgrounds as a 'cinema of attractions'; an audio visual mode that has influenced (and continues to influence) such staples of contemporary media experience as IMAX, videogames and QuickTime movies. So far, so uncontroversial. But, recognising that Gunning's research was seminal, it is worth saying that while an archaeological approach to early cinema makes sense – drawing out overlaps between early film and panoramas, daguerreotypes, stereoscopes and more – extrapolating his method to other periods of film history may not be as fruitful. When classic Hollywood cinema reached maturity, to take the obvious example, the studio system made it a more closed and self-referential form. A media archaeological approach to film history would likely work best at profound moments of change such as the coming of sound, the roll out of television, and the opening of the digital frontier. And there's no obvious reason to assume that what is true of film history will not hold for a wider range of media. Media archaeology in this guise seems best suited to (and indeed is likely to have been born out of) attempts to understand the significance of moments of technological convergence and transference.

In addition to borrowing from Tom Gunning's approach to film history, media archaeology as described here rests on two further intellectual props. Firstly, that the 'cinema of attractions' helped stimulate a new visceral way of experiencing the world - the way in which media can shoot a rush of blood to the head, send a sharp pain to the gut, set off the reflex to sit bolt upright. If one of the markers of being 'modern' in the 19th century had been the increasingly visual nature of urban societies, the developing media technologies of the 20th century represented, and stimulated, a fleshier, more viscous, type of experience: a collision of excitement and anxiety. Think of the fairground audience running away from the projected image of a train

rushing towards it. From the ‘cinema of attractions’ of the early 20th century, media archaeology makes connections with the joypad, keyboard and VCU of today. Here, in one of the book’s many borrowings from Michel Foucault, Parikka tethers media archaeology to biopolitics – stressing the role of media technology in advancing, embodying, and regulating social knowledge. Much is made of the way in which media technology drills humans into its use. The image of the lone radio operator behind enemy lines in the war fast forwards to the image of a boy texting civilian forms of private code to his friends today.

One of the claims for the importance of media technologies is that they are the product (for example) of advances in the mathematics laboratory as well as conduits of that knowledge. New media technologies thus provide a link between artistic experiments in language, communications and creativity; and emerging sciences, experimental laboratory practices and the development of new units of measurement. This last point brings us explicitly to media archaeology’s sizeable (if not overwhelming) debt to Friedrich Kittler and the more dispersed field of German media theory. The third key plank of media archaeology identified by Parikka is in the deep material structure of media technology. QuickTime films may resemble ‘the cinema of attractions’ but they are constructed out of pixels rather than made up of photographic representations of the world. Digital images are lines of light and electricity ordered by mathematical equations. This technological shift, it is claimed, radically alters humans’ ability to communicate. In the digital age, texts do not exist in any space or time that humans can perceive, but only in computer memory. The texts themselves are mediated by programmed software the forms of which depend on the configurations of operating systems, which themselves depend on hardware, which itself responds to variations in voltage. Meanwhile, computers have become so complex they can only be manufactured through computer-aided design. Media archaeology is accordingly a method of intellectual inquiry that stresses non-human agency. The mathematical basis of modern media, the type of knowledge they embody, the ways in which they are distributed – these are the material concerns of media archaeology. It focuses on the workings of the media which are too large, long, miniscule or swift for the individual to normally perceive.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of this intriguingly mixed intellectual lineage is that what Parikka describes as media archaeology downplays, if not does away with, common critical categories such as text, works or author, to focus on the intermedial journeys of cyclically occurring formal tropes, a type of biopolitics most concerned with the pre- and un-conscious, and the deep non-human structure of media technology. In the same way that post-structural linguistics scholars argue that we do not speak language, it speaks us, the argument here is that humans must adapt themselves to evolving media technologies in order to function. The system of communication precedes the manner and mode of communication. A Teutonic gloom that brings to mind Kafka’s *The Judgement* hangs over much of this. (‘Our writing tools are working on our thoughts’, as Kittler enthusiastically quoted Nietzsche, conjuring up an appealing image of the German philosopher hunched over his new typewriter.) And yet Parikka is careful to stress that media archaeology is not merely a variant on Kittler’s theories, and also takes pains to reject the charge of technological determinism. These protestations are not always convincing. ‘While there is room for a critical debate about whether this is a “techno-determinist” view we are talking about’, he writes, ‘we can flip it to illustrate the important political economic implications of where our computer age discourse networks are embedded, and how the fact that power is now circulated through software to hardware is inseparable from the proprietary industries that produce the platforms on which our media for seeing and hearing are governed’. Whatever else that sentence does (how does one flip ‘techno-determinism’?) it shows Twitter has yet to inscribe itself on Parikka’s psyche.

For better or worse, media archaeology as defined here is frequently less a broad engagement with the material culture of media technology (which, admittedly, is what I had hoped it would be) than a successor variant of the approach Foucault showcased in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. ‘Descent’ is at the heart of the intellectual chase. The ‘what if’ of roads not taken is prized over a present whose virtues are assumed to be overstated. To pay dues to the mainstream, to accept at face value, or take common parlance seriously is nearly always to be beneath contempt. Such an ethos flatters the historian, and sounds sexy, but it is not always, or arguably often, true. It’s evident that telecommunications engineers at the GPO in the UK in the 1930s anticipated developments such as mobile phones, wireless communications and even applications

such as Skype. Parikka himself cites an example from the BBC television programme *Tomorrow's World*, which in 1967 introduced a prototype computer which it was hoped would act as a calendar, bank account interface, and children's educational tool. The fact that such technology took decades to mature does not, just of itself, appear especially revealing. Furthermore, the book's intellectual assumptions do not always have happy consequences for the convincing presentation of its argument. Firstly, a degree of sloganeering creeps in. For example, 'with "media", and especially digital media, becoming the primary fantasy object of the new capitalist economy's wet dreams since the 1990s, [Siegfried] Zielenski's important goal seems to be to resist such an economically driven, narrow appropriation of media technologies'. The blurb describes the book as written with 'steampunk attitude' but there are other adjectives for it. More seriously, it is both a missed opportunity and a genuine sadness, albeit one which may well just reflect the pauperised nature of academic publishing, that Parikka has made no effort to present his argument about the importance of media archaeology, or illustrate the importance of the new intellectual vistas it opens up (which really do seem significant), in a form that is itself media archaeological. The book has a reasonable selection of black and white photos, but they are only utilised in an all too conventional say-what-you-see fashion. Secondly, and more fundamentally, the book's rhetoric necessarily foregrounds either the (sadly) neglected of the past or the marginal avant-garde of contemporary conceptual art. Some of the material gathered together is fascinating, but, at its worst, the book elevates the obscure apparently only to avoid engaging with 'docile' normality. Parikka is commendably alive to this, but not always in command of it. Indeed, by wearing so many self-reinforcing theoretical certainties on the sleeve of its otherwise not especially transparent prose, *What is Media Archaeology?* appears to revel in the fact that it is preaching a discipline that will alienate at least as many as it will attract. This is possibly a discipline for a select band of disciples.

Overall, although the title gives the impression of a measured, authoritative 'how to' guide, the book is sounding the trumpets at the vanguard of an emerging field. Consequently, while the book's structure works its way from what media archaeology has been to what it might develop into, the prose resounds with the feverish cackle of an up-all-night brainstorm. Cultural studies, film, media arts, history – it seems no disciplinary bounds can hold media archaeology. Ideas and asides come thick and fast, although you don't often get a sense that they are coalescing into something more. The critical frame is constantly moving.

An important reoccurring presence in *What is Media Archaeology?* is the work of the American artist/composer Paul DeMarinis, whose work obsessively reuses and reassembles old technologies. Because of the book's stress on the centrality of deconstructing and reconstructing media technologies in order to reveal secret histories and lost lineages, there are extended (and interesting) discussions of contemporary artists in America and Europe as well as mentions of festivals, for example, one celebrating *The Art of The Overhead Projector*. A little vogueishly, perhaps, Parikka ties computer hackers and DIY programmers into an 'alternative' scene with artists and curators practicing media archaeology. (Although, as the emergence of the Pirate Party in Germany illustrates, this may not be as opportunistic as it first seems.) Parikka makes the point that such artistic and intellectual experimentation can help us understand how technology shapes perceptions and builds platforms for social relations, work, entertainment and identity. The deeper anxiety is that in an almost completely mediated world, humans have to write 'code' and engineer technology in order to be able to say, or do, anything accurate or interesting. This seems a rather Romantic anxiety for an advocate of non-human humanities.

Near the beginning of *What is Media Archaeology?*, the author notes that the resilience of vinyl records, 8-bit games and Sony Walkmans as 'zombie media' correlates with the childhood preferences of a generation that is now hitting early-middle age. This is surely correct. Nintendo and Sega have become a new generation's rocking horses and train sets. Without wanting to be too reductive, you can't help but notice that media archaeology, as practiced here, is a mode of critical analysis historiographical essay plus that brings together many of the formative cultural building blocks of the Generation X demographic. Parikka drops names with the same rapidity that 1990s rappers namechecked brands. (And there's often reason to be grateful for this: *What is Media Archaeology?* opened up several new literatures for me.) Alongside the sophisticated middle-class consumer preferences and jaundiced post-Cold War politics sit references to all the popular cultural theories imbibed by the part of that generation that stayed on at university to get PhDs.

In this sense, much of *What is Media Archaeology?* seems peculiarly familiar and second hand, even as it stakes out ostensibly new territory. A valid, albeit narrow way, to understand the book's argument is as the intellectual conspicuous consumption of a Western educated scholar of thirty-to-forty something vintage. As Kittler himself attempted to historicise how the theories of thinkers like Freud and Lacan were shaped by changes in media technology, it doesn't seem wrong to subject Parikka, a lecturer/practitioner at Winchester School of Art, to similar treatment. 'Media are not pseudopods for extending the human body', wrote Kittler, 'they follow the logic of escalation that leaves us and written history behind it'. This is a sentiment that the generation which grew up hiding behind the sofa from Skynet's cyborg agents can instinctively share.

---

**Source URL:**<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1343>

#### **Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/38764>