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Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means by Siegfried Zielinski

Deep Time of the Media

Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means

Siegfried Zielinski

TRANSLATED BY GLORIA CUSTANCE

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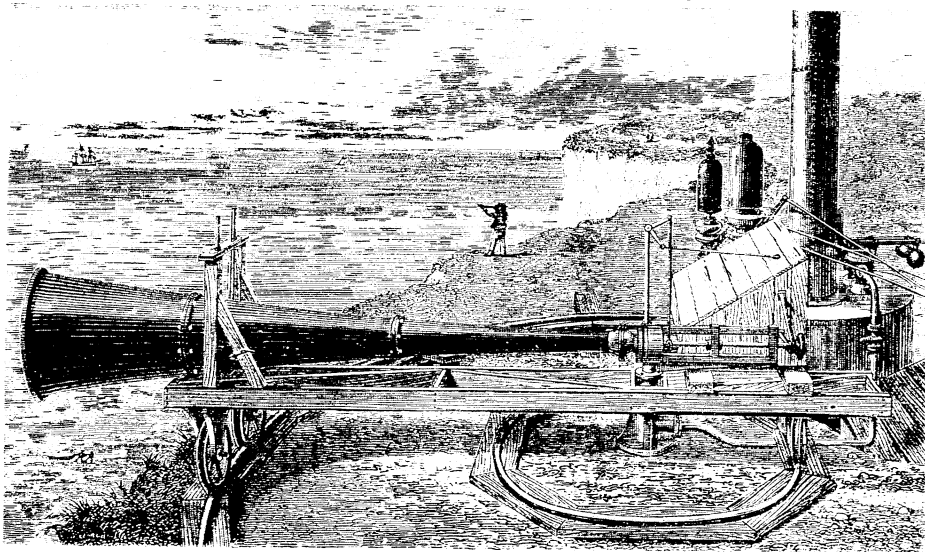


Figure 1.1 “The problem: At times, when a fact is thrown into the smoothly flowing river of scientific development that completely contradicts earlier conceptions, one of the strangest transformations takes place. What is slightly new is either dissolved and assimilated or, if it is too deviant in the present situation, it sinks to the bottom as a foreign body where the deposits of time cover it—it either has an effect much later or never at all. That which is significantly new, however, rapidly has a conspicuous influence on the entire state [of things]. A violent perturbation of ideas about and over this commences. . . .” (Text: Ostwald 1896, p. 1f; illustration: Tyndall, 1883, frontispiece)

Foreword

The sense of present which we live each day, as a conflict between the representatives of ideas having different systematic ages and all competing for possession of the future, can be grafted upon the most inexpressive archaeological record. Every shred mutely testifies to the presence of the same conflicts. Each material remnant is like the reminder of the lost causes whose only record is the successful outcome among simultaneous sequences.

—GEORGE KUBLER, *THE SHAPE OF TIME*

An anemic and evolutionary model has come to dominate many studies in the so-called media. Trapped in progressive trajectories, their evidence so often retrieves a technological past already incorporated into the staging of the contemporary as the mere outcome of history. These awkward histories have reinforced teleologies that simplify historical research and attempt to expound an evolutionary model unhinged from much more than vague (or eccentric) readings of either the available canon or its most obvious examples. Anecdotal, reflexive, idiosyncratic, synthetic, the equilibrium supported by lazy linearity has comfortably subsumed the media by cataloguing its forms, its apparatuses, its predictability, its necessity. Ingrained in this model is a flawed notion of survivability of the fittest, the slow assimilation of the most efficient mutation, the perfectibility of the unadapted, and perhaps, a reactionary avant-gardism. In this model there is less failure than dopey momentum and fewer ruptures than can be easily accounted for. As a historiography it provides an orthodox

itinerary uncluttered by speculation or dissent, unfettered by difference, disconnected from the archive, averse to heterogeneity.

This laissez-faire historiography dominates American writing concerned with the histories of media and has fueled both oversimplification and imprecision. History is, after all, not merely the accumulation of fact, but an active revisioning, a necessary corrective discourse, and fundamentally an act of interrogation—not just of the facts, but of the displaced, the forgotten, the disregarded.

For some in the media, “archaeology” has come to supplant basic history, replacing it with a form of material retrieval—as if the preservation of materiality was tantamount to preserving history itself. This has led to an archaeology (really more a mere cataloging) of the apparatus itself, rather than an investigation of the scenes in which the apparatus found its way into the spheres of research and experience.

Michel Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is defiant in distinguishing archaeology from other forms of historiography. Archaeology is “the systematic description of a discourse-object,” (139) it “tries to establish the system of transformations that constitute change,” (173), it “does not have a unifying, but a diversifying effect,” (160) it “is not supposed to carry any suggestion of anticipation.” (206)

It is the analysis of silent births, or distant correspondences, of permanences that persist . . . of slow formations that profit from the innumerable blind complicities. . . . Genesis, continuity, totalization: these are the themes of the history of ideas.

But archaeological description is precisely such an abandonment of the history of ideas, a systematic rejection of its postulates and procedures . . . (Foucault, 138)

As such, archaeology is not a substitute for “the history of ideas,” not a proxy for iconography, not an alternative for eccentric discovery or collecting, not a surrogate for rigorous research. With this in mind, it seems imperative to delineate an approach to “media archaeology” that, on the one hand, avoids idiosyncrasies or subjectivities, and, on the other, doesn’t lull itself into isolating media history as a specialized discipline insulated from its discursive historical role.

There’s little doubt that the multithreaded developments of media have numerous unresolved histories and that an enormous task of retrieval and conceptualization has yet to be achieved. How a media archaeology can constitute itself

against self-legitimation or self-reflexivity is crucial if it is to circumvent the reinvention of unifying, progressive, cyclical, or “anticipatory” history—even as it is challenged to constitute these very vague histories as an antidote to the gaping lapses in traditional historiography. Indeed it is this very problem that afflicts media archaeology. The mere rediscovery of the forgotten, the establishment of oddball paleontologies, of idiosyncratic genealogies, uncertain lineages, the excavation of antique technologies or images, the account of erratic technical developments, are, in themselves, insufficient to the building of a coherent discursive methodology.

In this sense the notion of resurrecting dead media could prove farcical, futile, or more hopefully, deeply fertile. A broad accounting of the evolution of the apparatus, of the media image, of the history of the media effect, of excavating the embedded intellectual history, and so on, is surely the precursor of what will be an invaluable reconfiguration of a history largely focused on the device and its illusory images. Similarly, the rediscovery of uncommon or singular apparatuses, novel and fantastic as they might be, is neither decisive nor fully adequate to formulate an inclusive approach that distinguishes it from connoisseurship, or worse, antiquarianism. Merely reconstituting or retrofitting “old” media into “new” contexts could, in this sense, only emerge as techno-retro-kitsch.

What is most necessary for the field of media archaeology is to both distinguish it as a nascent discipline and to set some boundaries in order to avoid its trivialization. Archaeology, as Foucault writes, “is not a return to the innermost secret of the origin,” rather it “describes discourses as practices specified in the element of the archive” (p. 138 from same source.) Without evolving coherences that are neither reductive nor dogmatic, media archaeology faces numerous issues: to evolve histories of technologies, apparatuses, effects, images, iconographies, and so forth, within a larger scheme of reintegration in order to expand a largely ignored aspect of conventional history.

Already some useful examples of this exist, from Siegfried Giedion’s *Mechanization Takes Command* or E. J. Dijksterhuis’s *Mechanization of the World Picture* to Friedrich Kittler’s *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* or Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s *Railway Journey* or *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the 19th Century*. Michel Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Laurent Mannoni’s *The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema*. Norman Klein’s *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects*. Each tackles the apparatus (or its “effects”) as integral to the substantive changes they wrought as modernity emerged. Not under the spell of linearity, these books stand as guidebooks (among many

others), for the establishment of diversified approaches to a media history and, more specifically, a media archaeology that stands as a decisive field if it can develop forms that extrapolate more than missing links.

Siegfried Zielinski's *Deep Time of the Media* intensifies and extends these studies with a wide range of scholarship from Stephen Jay Gould's "punctuated equilibrium" to Georges Bataille's "general economy," and, more deeply, into the original volumes of Athanasius Kircher, Giovan Battista della Porta, and Giuseppe Mazzolari. Instead of tracking the reverberations, *Deep Time of the Media* situates the effect in the midst of its own milieu. Though particular approaches may represent harbingers, augurs, precursors, they are purposefully rooted and serve particular goals.

It is in this context that Zielinski's *Deep Time of the Media* comes as a pivotal work challenging the field in a number of ways. In rebridging (perhaps demolishing) the widening gulf between *techné* and *epistémè*, *Deep Time of the Media* refuses the mere instrumentalization of technology as meticulously as it integrates the responsibilities of knowledge. Riding through the stratifications has revealed far more than the unearthing of new "species" of media, but is leading toward a rethinking of the bleak search for origins by imagining (exposing) intricate topologies that link movement and coincidence, failure and possibility, obscurity and revelation. This move through and across the "tectonic" flows suggests a sweeping remapping of the hitherto centralized nodes of learning and that traces the decentralized currents of time, space, and communication as a kind of historical formation in which routes replace nodes and in which east meets west meets north meets south. In this the epistemic centers in the Eurocentric canon just don't hold and nor does a singular rationalistic scientific *logos*.

In its "case studies" *Deep Time of the Media* provides both a rigorous methodology and a reconceptualization of media studies. For Zielinski only full primary sources provide adequate evidence. So in tandem with a rigorous and dedicated teaching and lecturing schedule, his peripatetic research has taken him on the nomadic circuits of his subjects. Here he constructs the new cartography, seizes on the crossed path, the forgotten archive. His lectures, always laden with the trade-mark overhead projector, always trace an adventure into some new facet of the journey—with an obscure archive a decisive discovery.

Abandoning historical convention in favor of historical acuity, *Deep Time of the Media* travels into deep time and discovers not just more remains, but instead neglected constellations. Within these are towering figures of scientific and philosophical investigation—della Porta, Kircher, Ritter, Hutton, Lombroso,

among many others. These bold personalities demand our attention not because they outdid their times, but rather because they embodied them.

With them come the shifting objects of study—less and less material—light and shadow, electricity and conduction, sound and transmission, magic and illusion, vision and stimuli—in short, conditional phenomena. Fleeting and contingent, the phenomenal world was lured into visibility by instruments whose ingenuity often eclipsed their discoveries. At least we had been convinced that this is so. Zielinski proves us wrong. Through their instruments the sphere of representation exploded. Its fragments resonate in every future media apparatus. Through their instruments the interface emerged, through their instruments a fragile imaginary was brought to light, through their instruments time, sound, reflex, could be seen, through their instruments the world was no longer a paltry given, it was a moving target, a dynamic presence, it was, to put it bluntly, alive.

Ever since, our machines have aspired to the "real" and, luckily, have fallen short of their phony virtual utopias. This surely explains why the last chapter of *Deep Time* focuses on the "artistic, scientific, technical, and magical challenges" that persist in contemporary media praxis. Zielinski's tenacious role as a historian has never restrained his enormous commitment to colleagues and students. His unyielding charge is to relentlessly cultivate "dramaturgies of difference," to "intervene" into the omnivorous systems from the periphery, to refuse centralization, to seize the imagination back from its grim and superfluous engineers, and to construct an art worthy of its "deep time." As Deleuze writes:

It is not enough to disturb the sensory-motor connections. It is necessary to combine the optical-sound image with the enormous forces that are not those of simply intellectual consciousness, nor of the social one, but of a profound, vital intuition.

—Timothy Druckrey