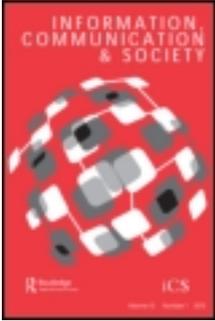


This article was downloaded by: [Vienna University Library]

On: 11 September 2012, At: 00:04

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954  
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH,  
UK



## Information, Communication & Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rics20>

### Media Archaeology. Approaches, Applications, and Implications

Astrid Mager<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute of Technology Assessment (ITA), Austrian Academy of Sciences, Strohgasse 45/5, A-1030, Vienna  
E-mail:

Version of record first published: 10 Sep 2012.

To cite this article: Astrid Mager (): Media Archaeology. Approaches, Applications, and Implications, Information, Communication & Society, DOI:10.1080/1369118X.2012.722224

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.722224>



PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages

whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## BOOK REVIEW

Erkki Huhtamo & Jussi Parikka, *Media Archaeology. Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 368 pp., ISBN: 9780520262744 (pbk), £18.95.

*Media Archaeology* looks like a classic work of arts and humanities scholarship at first sight. Assembling theoretical and methodological reflections on media archaeology as well as historic case studies organized around different, partly exotic, media technologies – including the Japanese ‘Baby Talkie’, a special kind of zoetrope for the gramophone, or the ‘Love Letter Generator’ invented by Christopher Strachey – readers of this journal may ask why the book should matter to the social sciences. That was my first reaction when I was invited to review the book, at any rate. Having read the book, however, I do see how the media archaeology approach presented in the book can figure as a valuable contribution to our own work. In fact, the main arguments of the anthology are closely related to central ideas from the field of science and technology studies, my own disciplinary background. Bruno Latour’s notion ‘technology is society made durable’ immediately came to my mind when working my way through the book. The idea of ascribing agency to technologies, or artifacts in a more general sense – one of the central arguments of the book – made me think of the Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2005) most readers are familiar with, I assume.

The book can hence be seen as a fascinating addition to work carried out in the social sciences; media studies, software studies, and internet research concerned with the materiality of network technologies most particularly. It impressively shows what we can learn about new media when turning to their old predecessors. It creatively elaborates how we can make phonographs, television sets, or old computer games ‘talk’, from a humanistic and artistic perspective. Rather than a media history, though, the book aims at providing a media archaeological approach, as the title suggests. Instead of focusing on narratives and offering a linear history of media technologies, it puts materiality, infrastructure and complexity at the centre of attention. Or to quote Wolfgang Ernst in his essay in the book:

Equally close to disciplines that analyze material (hardware) culture and to the Foucauldean notion of the ‘archive’ as the set of rules governing the

range of what can be verbally, audiovisually, or alphanumerically expressed at all, media archaeology is both a method and an aesthetics of practicing media criticism, a kind of epistemological reverse engineering, and an awareness of moments when media themselves, not exclusively humans anymore, become active 'archaeologists' of knowledge'. (p. 239)

This quotation nails down the material dimension of media archaeology making this approach a highly useful resource for both the humanities and social sciences. Since the book is an edited volume, it provides a rich repertoire of interdisciplinary contributions to and a good overview of the emerging field, or 'undisciplined discipline' (p. 323), of media archaeology. Its central goal is not to offer 'correct' guidelines or an 'orthodoxy'. Rather, 'the book presents itself as an open forum for very different voices, hoping to trigger "polylogues" about the problems and prospects of this emerging field', as the editors state in the introduction of the book (p. 2). Accordingly, this compendium comprises theoretical texts developing an analytical framework for media archaeological work, but also empirical case studies discussing analogue and digital media technologies and their socio-cultural implications, such as Tausk's 'Influencing Machine', a psychotic side-effect of technological development observed in the nineteenth century. Grounded in German media theory (e.g. Kittler, Zielinski, Benjamin), but also drawing on such heterogeneous thinkers like Foucault, McLuhan, Deleuze, and Freud, to name but a few of the rich corpus, the book lays a valuable foundation for reading new media and digital technologies against old, or even 'dead' media.

Structurally, the book is divided into three sections. The first section deals with 'engines of/ in the imaginary'. While Erkki Huhtamo chooses a topos study to question 'the new' and show how media cultures rely on the already known, Eric Kluitenberg focuses on the archaeology of imaginary media to understand how imaginaries around technological media travel across different historical and discursive settings. Jeffrey Sconce's and Thomas Elsaessers' essays draw on psychoanalytic concepts to discuss the 'Influencing Machine' as a projection of broadcast media, rather than a schizophrenic disorder (Sconce) and Freud as a media theorist by reflecting on Freud's text 'Notes on the Mystic Writing Pad' (Elsaesser).

The second part is concerned with '(inter)facing media'. It consists of four chapters, of which the first one analyses the zoetrope 'Baby Talkie' from the early twentieth century Japan to address encounters between cinema and music (the zoetrope was put on a gramophone), the modern and the traditional, as well as the 'Western' and the 'Japanese' (Machiko Kusahara). Also dealing with historic optical toys, Wanda Strauven shows how cinema, from the viewpoint of gaming, is transforming itself into a touch medium reconnecting with its origins, the zoetrope and other devices. Claus Pias suggests the anthropology of play to investigate computer games and their timeliness, rhythm and control

over users and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun engages with the archive in the digital era and asks how the ephemeral may endure.

The third part is titled 'between analogue and digital' and compiles five essays primarily reflecting on noise and materiality. Paul DeMarinis and Jussi Parikka discuss decay, misinformation, and miscommunication by focusing on noise. Presenting art works that forge and break links between marks and noises (DeMarinis) and conceptualizing noise as tactics and politics of media (Parikka), both authors emphasize the importance of acknowledging dysfunctionality and breakdown in media archaeology. The last three chapters of the book are concerned with materiality and the importance of focusing on infrastructure and the agency of the machine. Rooted in media materialism Wolfgang Ernst's essay develops the concept of 'media archaeography' and puts the machine – and its material modes of inscription – at the center of attention. Casey Alt suggests an object-oriented design approach to understand how the computer became a medium and, finally, Noah Wardrip-Fruin discusses the 'Love Letter Generator' and argues for critically engaging with software processes that increasingly govern visual surfaces of contemporary culture.

The afterword is written by Vivian Sobchack and can be read as a plea for the 'presence in absence', the 'thinginess' of things, and the act of 'closely looking at and, when possible, touching, operating, and performing the object of study' (p. 327).

The three parts of the book may be seen as constituting a continuum, which spans from rather classical essays on *topoi* such as 'the little people living inside in the machine' re-evoked in different media to more radical viewpoints on the materiality of technologies neglecting narratives and cultural analyses (partly contradicting each other). They can be interpreted as mirroring the 'materialist turn' observed in both the social sciences and the humanities. They signify the shift from the social construction of technologies focusing on society shaping technology, user-centered approaches, and cultural interpretations of new media towards the actor-network theory focusing on society as co-evolving with technology, machine-centered approaches, and the analysis of code, infrastructure and software. I thus highly recommend the book to readers of this journal, especially those interested in network technologies and the norms, values and ideas built into their technical set-up. Doing research on ideologies incorporated in digital media myself, I would further suggest combining the media archaeological perspective with contributions from the political economy of (new) media. This would enable us to not only better understand ideologies of – old and new media – but also critique the values media technologies carry through time and space (a facet the book lacks in my mind even though the critical impetus of media archaeology was mentioned by various authors). The merging of concepts from media archaeology and critical new media studies can serve as an innovative starting point to unpack and deconstruct

the inscriptions and socio-political implications media technologies embody in their technical *Gestalt* and hence solidify in society.

## References

Latour, B. (2005) *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*Astrid Mager*

© 2012 Astrid Mager

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.722224>

---

**Astrid Mager** holds a PhD in Philosophy (Social Studies of Science). She is postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Technology Assessment in Vienna, Austrian Academy of Sciences, where she currently leads the project 'Glocal Search. Search technology at the intersection of global capitalism and local socio-political cultures' (funded by the Jubiläumsfonds of the Oesterreichische Nationalbank (OeNB), project number 14702). Her research interests are focused on search engine politics, digital knowledge, privacy, net politics, digital methods and their implications. She blogs at <http://www.astridmager.net> and tweets @astridmager. *Address:* Institute of Technology Assessment (ITA), Austrian Academy of Sciences, Strohgasse 45/5, A-1030 Vienna. [email: [astrid.mager@oeaw.ac.at](mailto:astrid.mager@oeaw.ac.at)]

---