INTRODUCTION

Becoming of Media Archaeology: paths, knowledge and methodologies

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Introduction

This monograph is dedicated to an area of knowledge that in the English-speaking and Central European, and increasingly in the Spanish-speaking world, has long been attracting great interest. We are referring to what is known as Media Archaeology, an area in which the clear and fertile resonance of the term with Michel Foucault's archaeology of knowledge is evident, but which exceeds and extends the scope of the latter along other unprecedented paths, to explore its own becoming creation. Our interest, *a priori*, is not to defend a firm academic position, in a sense of pure praxis and conceptual comfort, but rather to collect a series of theoretical (and to a certain extent epistemological and methodological) approaches in a set of discourses and practices linked to the media deployed over time. Media Archaeology brings together common interests that have been developing for decades from various foci and authors, ranging from visual studies, cultural history and film studies, to media studies, archival studies and the history and theory of media art.

Without going into excessive diatribes regarding the allocation of a strict disciplinary area specific to the term Media Archaeology, with this monograph we propose to show the different vectors of its gestation and evolution as a valid label when speaking of a set of interests with common motivations. Precursors such as Walter Benjamin or Siegfried Giedion, in connection with other authors such as Aby Warburg, Erwin Panofsky, Ernst Robert Curtius, Michel Foucault or Marshall McLuhan, could certify the diversity of connections and places of origin as regards the current standard-bearers of Media Archaeology. The term itself was not always defended as such until recently, when scholars such as Friedrich Kittler, Siegfried Zielinski, Thomas Elsaesser, Erkki Huhtamo, Wolfgang Ernst and Jussi Parikka

decisively contributed to explaining the historical-methodological frameworks in relation to media that today form the scaffolding that holds us up as we move forward.

It is then a framework of research that starts from the consideration of the cultural foundations of artefacts and technology (Zielinski 1999) and allows the construction of alternative histories of those media that have been suppressed, rejected or forgotten, taking into account those dead-end paths or "losers", those inventions that never came to be considered as a material product (Huhtamo and Parikka 2011) or those investigations that have never been legitimised but which, when they are revisited, acquire new significance in our present, which is also thirsty for difference. Therefore, these are inventions and inventors that, without apparently having prospered, may have influenced the development of media, and whose recognition is immensely useful when it comes to delving deeper into media history, and therefore art history.

Although this neologism covers scattered methodological processes with similar motivations, we can also affirm that the use of a specific term to bring together this set of motivations is the first step towards being able to endow it with existence, resistance and persistence, and to be able to advance its programmatic objectives. The multitude of bibliographic titles that have used to the term for decades (Huhtamo 1997, Elsaesser 2004, Parikka 2012a, among many others) firstly led us to probe the implications of these studies in some interviews and articles published in the journal *Artnodes* (Huhtamo 2006 and 2007, Parikka 2012b) and their influence in the Ibero-American sphere (Burbano 2013, Alsina 2014), and to deal with it laterally in the monographs of *Artnodes* "Art Matters I and II" in 2015 and "Art and speculative futures" in 2017. Then, in 2017, we arranged a day of open debate in Barcelona, organised by the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) in collaboration with the Virreina Center de la Imatge (Barcelona City Council) in which the researchers Thomas Elsaesser and Wolfgang Ernst presented two different approaches to Media Archaeology, giving rise to an intense debate that went on even after the event.[1]

After the success of the event, and in light of the obvious interest in the issues outlined there, we opened a call for those academics and professionals who had been working in this field for some time with the aim of launching the present monograph and disseminating the variety of active approaches and perspectives in relation to the term. We believe that this space can serve as a channel, not only to develop a defence or theoretical debate on what Media Archaeology is or is not, but above all to provide a series of case studies that give rise to a convergence of interests and even some concrete shared methodologies. As Erkki Huhtamo comments in one of his most recent works, *Illusions in Motion. Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (2013), we can finally say that Archaeology can be read as a *discours de la mèthode*:

> [...] corrects our understanding of the past by excavating lacunas in shared knowledge. It reassesses existing media-historical narratives that are biased because of their ideological and historiographical presuppositions, or insufficient evidence. (Huhtamo 2013, xviii)

In this way, linked to the editorial work of this issue, we would simply like to trace out and put together an image or map – without any pretensions as to it being exhaustive, which would in itself be a contradiction of the media-archaeological approach – of what has so far been the becoming of Media Archaeology; of how methodologies hidden between lines and from a conscious position of being an *anarchaeology* (Goddard 2015) end up producing a set of effectively existing practices. To do so, we could begin by emphasising that the final result of the term is more than the mere sum of its parts, that is, of media and archaeology. It is a three-fold understanding that gives rise to a concrete perspective: 1) firstly, the understanding of the materiality of these artefacts; 2) then the causality underlying all history; and 3) its textual understanding. That is to say, these authors are not limited to a merely patrimonial or archival archaeological task, although this is absolutely necessary insofar as they ascertain the value of and recover those optical, audiovisual, computational and sound devices or artefacts that are lost, obsolete or neglected from the point of view of media and information history. This task precedes or accompanies another of a particularly analytical nature that, in the case of Media Archaeology, is based on an interest in media ontology and the instinct towards usage seen in collectors and documentalists.

Historical bases for Media Archaeology

Taking an archaeological perspective in the current day, in which the new seems to completely capture our desires and imagination, is still a declaration of principles. The new, and its goddaughter innovation, have installed themselves as the authentic engine of an ideology of progress that feeds everything in its will to differentiate, promoting strategies, tactics and arguments of all kinds, and in all directions (including those that arise from the bases encompassed under the term 'social innovation'). During the last few decades, the political economy of the new has governed the becoming of our restless cultures, inscribed in too many years of simple theologies. The new occupies a hegemonic place in our culture, and as Boris Groys (2002) said in one of the first articles published in this journal:

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1. The programme, the talks and the audiovisual records from the day can be consulted at: http://catedratelefonica.uoc.edu/media-archaeologies/.

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New works of art act in the museum as symbolic windows that offer views of the infinite exterior. But, evidently, new works of art can fulfil this function only for a relatively short period of time before becoming no longer new but simply different, since their distance from ordinary things will have become, over time, too obvious. Then emerges the need to replace the 'old new' with the 'new new', to restore the romantic feeling of the infinite real. (Groys 2002, 6)

It is this romantic feeling of the infinite real that Groys related to the criticism of the new expressed by Soren Kierkegaard, who even contrasts that which is new to that which is different, since for him, newness in no case means the same as difference. We can only recognise difference when we already have the ability to recognise and identify this difference as a difference, and therefore no difference can be new at any time, because if it were really new, it could not be recognised as a difference; it would rather be a recognised difference, but not new. The novelty, then, would be a difference without difference, that we are not able to recognize because it is not related to any previously given structural code (Kierkegaard 1960, 34).

In any case, the dialectic between the new and the old seems to be of obligatory reference in all Media Archaeology, because, as Walter Benjamin (1989b) warned:

The creative possibilities of the new are in the main only slowly disclosed by these old forms, old instruments and fields which burst into a euphoric flowering when the innovation which has been in preparation emerges at last. (Benjamin 1989b, 310)

Decades later, with the appearance of digital technologies, Lev Manovich (2002) wondered what was new about the so-called new media; what it was that specifically made them new and until when they would be considered as such. His long-term historical perspective allowed him to take into account the way in which each era has named its new media, distinguishing them from the old ones, not only in terms of their forms but also in terms of their underlying operational contents and modes. Each era has had its new media, but, it seems, they were never as influential as our digital media. In fact, Manovich, in the introduction to his still more cited book *The Language of New Media* (2001) had the objective of tracing an ontology of new media that would account for its specificities, making a comparative analysis with what were then old media, and in dialogue with the experimental cinema of Dziga Vertov, one of the pioneers of the development of cinematographic language.

Today, while we continue extending the use of the label of "new media", these are still being modified and transformed by the innovative impulse of digital technologies and their increasingly rapid programmed obsolescence, driven by the post-industrial fervour embedded in our cultures, capitalist and consumer alike. This accelerated race towards technological obsolescence inevitably leads us to an increasingly extensive cemetery of Dead Media, as Bruce Sterling calls them (1999b). Rubbish of all kinds building up while it becomes a real environmental problem, leaving its indelible mark and contaminating our planet with uncontrolled waste. That exterminating angel of history that Walter Benjamin spoke of reappears here again, riding the future in the name of progress, without looking at the trail of destruction and desolation that it leaves in its wake (Benjamin 2008). A trail that we can no longer continue to ignore due to the irreversibility of its fatal consequences for our planet.

In the face of the strategic amnesia of digital culture and the new media industry, Media Archaeology can oppose these forces as a possibility for memory, and the scourge of oblivion. As the theorist Siegfried Zielinski would say, we should understand Media Archaeology as uncovering both "the old in the new" and "the new in the old", as well as revealing that the new is almost always old in the heat of battle for innovation. Obviously each historical and geographical context establishes its own notions of "new" and, as commented by Jussi Parikka (2015), there is a growing need for that history that is outside the usual focus of the English-speaking or Central European worlds. In short, Parikka tells us, the historical interest of knowledge is not limited to the histories of the past and of writing, but rather to the articulation of the contemporary as a meeting place for temporal directions: the new, the old, the fractured moment of the now.

And here it is not at all about, as Friedrich Nietzsche warned us, the search for an origin that carries meaning, but rather about tearing down the "cyclopean monuments" with the strokes of "discreet and apparently insignificant truths and according to a rigorous method" (Nietzsche 2001, 3). This history as a counter-memory, which connects on the one hand with Nietzschean genealogy and on the other with Foucauldian archaeology, does not intend to collect the essence of things, that is, their identity folded back on themselves, because, as Foucault explains it is not about:

[…] trying to recover "what has already been", the "same thing" of an image exactly adequate to itself; it is to have as adventitious all the adventures that may have taken place, all the traps and all the disguises. It is about trying to lift the masks, to finally reveal a first identity. Well, if the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, what is it that he learns? That behind things there is something all together different: "not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence". (Foucault 2008, 17)

For the untimely philosopher Nietzsche, what is found at the historical beginning of things is not the identity still preserved from its origin, but rather the discord of other things; nonsense. And so behind the always recent, avaricious, and measured truth, it posits the ancient proliferation of errors, turning it into the sort of error that cannot be refuted, because it was hardened into an unalterable form in the long baking process of history (Foucault 2008).

It is this truth that is inseparably united to power, to the pair power-knowledge where there is no model of truth that does not refer to a type of power or knowledge that does not express or imply an act of power that is exercised. In this way, they tell us, there is no "disinterested" truth but what there is a fight "for the truth", or rather, an incessant struggle "around the truth". More than the truth of history, the main issue becomes the *history of truths*, and that is when Foucault uses the genealogical method to analyse power, giving a new use to "history" from the untimely considerations of Nietzsche. Thus he introduces discontinuity in history, investigates those ruptures in discourses that do not correspond to the image of a continuous, unidirectional history, that obey a "destiny" or that refer to an "origin".

It is not about questioning the validity of truths, nor talking about the set of real things that are to be discovered or to be accepted, but rather elucidating the set of rules according to which the true is different from the false, and it applies to the true specific effects of power (Foucault 1984, 144), because basically:

> [...] what seems to us today "marvellously motley, profound and totally meaningful" is due to the fact that a "host of errors and phantasms" have given birth to it, and they still inhabit it in secret. We want historians to confirm our belief that the present rests upon profound intentions and immutable necessities. But the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference. (Foucault 2008, 21)

The becoming of Media Archaeology: a state of the art

We have previously mentioned the appearance of the term 'archaeology' in the area of film studies, and more specifically in the field dedicated to vision machines considered as pre-cinema or pre-history of cinema, where it appeared early in works such as *Archaeology of the Cinema* by C.W. Ceram (1965), or later *Mémoires de l'ombre et du son: an archéologie de l'audio-visuel* by Jacques Perriault (1981) and *Le grand art de la lumière et de l'ombre: archéologie du cinéma* by Laurent Mannoni (1995). These were initial investigations into the particularities of artefacts related to the history of cinema from a prospective viewpoint that revealed the existence of a whole series of devices and artefacts that shaped public life and leisure in Victorian society and the European context. However, from other historiographical foci, without using the term archaeology, these artefacts were taken into consideration not from the primitivist point of view as a prelude to what would later come to be the history of fully established cinema, but in total fullness as part of a broader visual culture linked to modernity. This is the case of Charles Musser's study *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (1994) or the well-known articles by Tom Gunning "The Cinema of Attraction

[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde" (1986) and "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator" (1995) in which the inquiry into the forms known as primitive film led to a rejection of the naive character of a viewer without visual skills when faced with the sensory impact of the new moving images. Instead, it was about investigating a context of full modernity mediated by the effervescence of a booming audiovisual culture that placed the exploration of the senses and the fascination with spectacles at the centre of leisure and life. Gunning and other authors such as Miram B. Hansen and Ben Singer took a historiographical path that, leaving the texts of the films in the background, explored the relationship between urban environments, new technologies and visual shock in what has been called the "modernity thesis" (Rabinovitz 2012, 198), which would completely reform studies on early cinema. Some interesting works that launched proposals under this perspective in the nineties can be found in the compendium edited by Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (1994) and the work by Anne Friedberg *Window Shopping. Cinema and the Postmodern* (1993). Beyond film studies, these approaches had much in common with a whole series of authors and case studies linked to visual studies that, inspired by Walter Benjamin and George Simmel, focused on the analysis of objects, things or architectures and common environments that had little to do with the works of art legitimised by the History of Religious Art. As can be gathered from the collective book on 19-century visual studies re-edited by Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (2004) with texts by key authors in the field such as Jonathan Crary, Tony Bennet and Linda Nochlin, besides analysing urban components or the cultural history of museography, or making a critique of the depoliticisation of art history, studies appear on electricity, on shopping centres, on the decoration of pavilions in universal exhibitions and on the massive presence of commercial advertisements.

Therefore, this emphasis on the links between the development of capitalism, techno-scientific development and new forms of visualisation will aim to understand how the camera obscuras and miniature theatres of the eighteenth century, stroboscopes and the proliferation of 3D viewing devices, movie theatres or peep shows such as cosmoramas and kinetoscopes, magical lantern shows and dioramas, as well as optical media of all kinds that emerged during the nineteenth century, highlight the central role that media and various materialities have played over the past centuries. The focus of attention will be on what kind of culture is born, how it works, what skills are developed, what forms of seeing or narrating, what meanings are put into play, and what bodily effects activate this new audiovisual and sensorial culture; in short, what its ontology is.

All these questions became even more urgent with the arrival of a whole series of disruptions caused by technological development and digital culture in the 20th and 21st centuries (Elsaesser 2004) and the accentuation of the interaction between media and bodies,

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from surveillance methods, forms of knowledge and exploration, control and education strategies and their role in techno-scientific development, to the effects that these attractions seek on the ways we entertain ourselves, act, explore and discover the world, etc. In short, how we relate to and shape reality. Against the hegemony of the new, it is about connecting a series of phenomena that are occurring with the arrival of modernity and the proliferation of an audiovisual culture and its hypermediated environments.

If, however, we focus on a purer version of the question based around the definition and consecration of the actual concept of Media Archaeology, we must refer to pioneering authors such as Zielinsky or Huhtamo.

The recovery of the term archaeology is reviewed in early texts like "Medienarchaeologie. In der Suchbewugung nach den unterschiedlichen Ordnungen des Visionierens" or "Media Archaeology" (Zielinsky 1994, 1996) and "From Kaleidoscomaniac to Cybernerd: Notes Toward an Archaeology of the Media" (Huhtamo 1997). As Huhtamo comments in this article, where one can find multiple references to those authors who make up the archaeological perspective, in reference to Walter Benjamin (particularly in his unfinished *Arcades Project*), the various remains of 19th century culture – buildings, technologies and merchandise, but also illustrations and literary texts – served as inscriptions that could lead us to an understanding of the ways in which a culture perceives and conceptualises the "deepest" ideological layers of its construction (Huhtamo 1997, 221).

As we mentioned at the beginning of this article, Media Archaeology is a plural space in which interests converge around different aspects of media histories that are considered displaced or forgotten, and the study of which can build more complex narratives around media ontology. The specific methodological approaches are derived depending on the aspects studied.

Breaking away from a causal or teleological history towards the peak of audiovisual forms or towards the technological culmination of future devices or apparatus, from Ceram, the archaeological perspective tries to reveal a series of recurrences, of eternal returns or *déjà vu*, that are repeated throughout the history of media:

> I would like to propose it as a way of studying recurring cyclical phenomena that (re)appear and disappear and reappear over and over again in media history. (Huhtamo 1997, 222)

From this perspective, we would try to understand cultural history through common sites – *topo* or *topoi*, complex structures of habits, customs and ideologies. For example, establishing a topos on the keyboard or mechanisation would relate the machines of the textile factories of 1830 with the penny arcades or the slot machines and the current videogames through the topos of human-machine interactivity, where some machines, although with different productive purposes, share certain experiences and the fact of capitalist co-optation: as producers of a momentary or lasting illusion in which one believes oneself to be in charge (Huhtamo 2007, 47).

Works like *Audiovisions. Cinema and Television as Entr'actes in History* (Zielinski 1999) also point to the methodological foundations of Archaeology through a historiographical twist that places the classical "institutions" of cinema and television on the same level as the uses of apparatuses and technological culture. Zielinki approaches media archaeology as a "practice of resistance" against what he perceives as a growing uniformisation of media culture (Huhtamo and Parikka 2011). This approach, which investigates practices that are not recognised – and not co-opted – by the audiovisual/artistic mainstream, is known as the variantological approach (Zielinski and Wagnermaier 2005) or anarchaeological approach within the field of Media Archaeology. In his research project Variantology/Archaeology of the Media and the associated workshops and publications, Zielinski, his team and the participants focus on projects that arose in former times, in geo-political areas that are disregarded and, above all, unknown in the history of media art. Variantology distances itself from the Eurocentric focus that dominates a large part of this field of media archaeology, and has had a particularly strong influence on the contribution made from Latin America to this field of knowledge (e.g., the extensive research work and creation of Andrés Burbano, but also Jasso and Garza Usabiaga, 2012, Jasso 2014, Beiguelman 2015; and Hofman 2016, among many others). The 2010 edition of the ISEA (International Symposium of Electronic Art) hosted the first "Latin Variantology" panel coordinated by Andrés Burbano and Zielinski himself. Works of art research and community creation such as that offered by Gabriel Vanegas on ancestral technologies are also explicitly aligned in this direction. More implicitly, although from an analogous position, we find several initiatives that have been developed in the south, among which we can mention IDIS (Investigación en Diseño de Imagen y Sonido [Research in Design of Image and Sound]),[2] in which the narration of art and media histories is rediscovered by changing the vectors of influence and established connections; and La Torre de América (The Tower of America), which accounts for the use of documentation in preservation practices and the variantological approach as a way to disrupt the linearity and globalising tendency of Art History.

Both the use of historical narration based on *topoi* and the variantological approach to archaeology give a (re)construction of the past from a genealogical approach. The umbrella of Media Archaeology, however, also encompasses researchers who address

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2. For more information about this project, visit: http://proyectoidis.org/.

artnodes

the reflection on time, media and cultural transmission from other types of theoretical-methodological constructs. Such is the case of Wolfgang Ernst, who takes another aspect of the archaeology of foucauldian knowledge: the archive. Ernst argues that, parallel to the historical media narrative that is constructed from a human perspective, an archaeology should be built on and from its materials that allows it to be contrasted (also complementing this narration "in parallel lines"). The media archaeography of Wolfgang Ernst is a technique to reconstruct the past in a way that is completely alternative and complementary to the historical discourse (Ernst, 2005). Ernst took as the basis for his media archaeography concepts such as machinic agency and true technical memory.

The consecration of the studies that weave the plural space of Media Archaeology will occur with the appearance of individual and collective works dedicated to what this monograph seeks to contribute. To finish, we would like to mention those works that may be useful in approaching the field, such as *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* by Siegfried Zielinski (2006), or *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* edited by Parikka and Huhtamo (2011), *What Is Media Archaeology?* by Jussi Parikka (2012); in Latin America, *Arte Tecnología: Archaeology, Dialectics and Mediation* edited by Karla Jasso, up to the most recent book by Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (2018).

Likewise, the attention given to this field and its growing influence is evidenced by the proliferation of studies that include considerations of Media Archaeology, as well as events, panels in international conferences and labs (e.g. the Media Archaeology Lab in Colorado), dedicated archives and collections (e.g. the Residual Media Depot in Montreal).

The monograph that we present here does not intend to be at all exhaustive, nor offer a complete panorama of all these paths, knowledge and methodologies that we mentioned at the beginning. We will leave it for another occasion, although arguments have already been presented in previous issues of the journal (Alsina 2014), to establish more and better connections with other perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches such as new materialism or science and technology studies, with which we can affirm that Media Archaeology shares some objectives, although there are significant differences between them. We have only tried to point out here some examples, approaches, authors and reflections that seem to be of significant interest when it comes to studying Media Archaeology, with all its complexities and heterogeneities, precisely to account for the constitutive richness that characterises it. We could continue to trace out more paths and point to connections with one or other authors and areas, but it is not pertinent here, as we must now make way for the different articles that make up this node of the journal.

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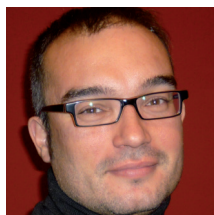
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Vanina Hofman is a research assistant in the Department of Arts and Humanities Studies of the Open University of Catalonia, as well as an independent cultural producer. She studies plural and divergent practices for the preservation and archiving of media arts. She is particularly interested in the processes involved in the construction of memory and oblivion in digital culture, unconventional art histories and digital materialities.

Vanina graduated with a degree in Image and Sound Design from the University of Buenos Aires (UBA). She has a Master's in Curatorial and Cultural Practices in Arts and New Media from the MECAD/ Ramon Llull University. She also holds a doctorate from the Internet Interdisciplinary Institute (IN3)/UOC.

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