



## Digital Culture & Education (DCE)

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Online Publication Date: November 15, 2013

**To cite this Article:** Nicoll, B. (2013). Review: Jussi Parikka's *What is media archaeology?* *Digital Culture & Education*, 5:2, 127-131. URL: <http://www.digitalcultureandeducation.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/nicoll.pdf>

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Benjamin Nicoll

Parikka, J. (2012). *What is media archaeology?* Cambridge: Polity. ISBN 0745650260, 200 pages, \$23 US.

As the title of Jussi Parikka's book suggests, the primary concern of *What is Media Archaeology?* (2012) is with explaining the theoretical and practical applications of media archaeology as it has been employed by media researchers, film historians, cultural critics and artists who operate under the banner of this enigmatic discipline. Media archaeology, an emerging sub-field of media research, tends to be understood by scholars as a way to prise media history from the prevailing capitalist and progressivist logic of technological progress. Recent academic work on the subject has also associated media archaeology with an examination of the material technological aspects of different media (Ernst 2013). While these are often recognised as common issues in the scholarly literature, theorists of media archaeology have not reached a consensus on how to define the discipline. This can be viewed as a consequence of struggles between the various positions or methodologies available for undertaking a media archaeological approach (see: Huhtamo & Parikka 2011). What an archaeological approach to media is, what it entails, is a question that has triggered academic debates about media archaeology and how it should be used as a research method (see: Ernst 2013; Huhtamo 2013).

Debates among media archaeologists about how to define the discipline have been fuelled by interactions among fields such as cinema and cultural studies, archive theory, new materialism, 'German media theory' and art history, each of which has adopted a particular understanding of media archaeology as a critical method. While this kind of disciplinary interaction has prevented the establishment of a coherent methodology for approaching media in archaeological terms, it can also be considered a positive feature of media archaeology in the sense that it emphasises the significance of experimental and cross-disciplinary research practices. This notion is perhaps most strongly put forward by Siegfried Zielinski in his work *Deep Time of the Media* (2006). Challenging the perception of technological progress as "continual march" (2006, p. 3), Zielinski qualifies media archaeology above all else as an exercise in critical resistance. Viewed in Zielinski's way, media archaeology is resistant not only towards mono-medial narratives but also towards the field's assimilation within a singular disciplinary framework.

Many theorists (Huhtamo 2013; Kluitenberg 2007; and to an extent Ernst 2013) share with Zielinski the view that media archaeology's central premise is to posit alternative genealogies for the development of technology over time. In so doing, media archaeology aims to sever the narrative threads woven by evolutionist approaches to media history. This, it could be argued, is where the significance of media archaeology resides: in its assertion that to be understood properly media must be viewed from less progressivist and more 'non-linear' perspectives. But this approach is also illustrative of another kind of 'resistance' media archaeology seems to have inherited: a resistance against the homogenised structure of academic methodologies. Through its insistence on non-linearity and non-conformity, media archaeology has gained a reputation as an

anarchic practice with unclear concerns, contexts and applications, which is somewhat in keeping with its iconoclastic approach to historical description. Until now, there has been no singular, clear approach to adopting media archaeology as a theoretical paradigm.

It is in this context that Jussi Parikka's *What is Media Archaeology?* emerges as a methodological treatise of sorts, seeking not only to demarcate and ground the discipline, but also to synthesise its disparate voices into a more cohesive theory of digital media culture. The stated aim of Parikka's book is to provide a pathway through the various theoretical and applied methods of media archaeological research. To this end, Parikka offers a thoroughly well researched and presented introduction to the discipline's interconnected strands of research. As in his earlier work on the subject, in *What is Media Archaeology?* Parikka seems somewhat troubled by the possibility of media archaeology's disenfranchisement at the hands of its early proponents, especially Zielinski, who established anarchic and rebellious patterns for the study of media objects past and present (Huhtamo & Parikka 2011, p. 8). Parikka's search for a stable media archaeological approach outside the flux of the discipline's enigmatic formations takes the form of a "cartographic" journey into the "various—at times contradictory and competing—strands of media archaeological investigations" (2012, p. 5). Perhaps the book's most commendable element is its desire to sort through the "entanglement" of media archaeology's "past and present" (p. 5), which it achieves by organising key media archaeological themes into a typology of research agendas, each with distinct aims and methods. It is because of this that *What is Media Archaeology?* will no doubt have a significant impact on future research, as it contributes something that the discipline has been lacking for some time: a refined set of methodological guidelines.

Each of the book's six main chapters is devoted to a particular topic or idea relating to the media archaeological approach. The chapters focus on: concepts of sense and affect as they relate to film theory and new film history; mediated imaginaries and alternative media histories; new materialism and 'German media theory'; noise and accidents; theories of the archive; and finally, artistic praxis. Because there is no overarching argument linking one chapter to the next, the book is particularly useful for readers wanting to gain selective insight on specific areas of media archaeological thought. When taken as a whole, *What is Media Archaeology?* provides a comprehensive introduction to the diverse threads of media archaeological practice. It also does an impressive job of illustrating how these threads link up and connect with fields as diverse as art history, cinema and cultural theory, code studies and psychoanalysis. For readers wanting to conduct more intensive research in any of the subjects covered in *What is Media Archaeology?*, each chapter contains some thoughtful recommendations for further reading.

As I have suggested, one of the strengths of *What is Media Archaeology?* is its distillation of media archaeological thought into a concentrated typology of methods. This is perhaps best evidenced in the first half of the book. Parikka begins his mapping of media archaeology in the second chapter, where he highlights the discipline's "affinities" with new film history and film theory by drawing on such concepts as "attraction", "tactility" and "affect" as they appear in traditional areas of visual culture analysis (2012, p. 39). He discusses the extensive historical and theoretical presence of media archaeological thought in the historiography of film theory, as well as in media theory from Marshall McLuhan's time to our own. In Chapter 3, Parikka examines the notion of 'imagined' media—that is, "media non-existent, fabricated, or at one point deemed impractical" (p. 43), and describes it as a possible antidote to contemporary media culture's relentless focus on technological innovation. Predicated on the work of Eric Kluitenberg (2007), who suggests using mediated "imaginaries" as a conceptual

tool to tap into the “wider unconscious”, Parikka sets out to develop the idea of imaginary media by questioning its implicit associations with Lacanian thought (2012, p. 46). In the fourth chapter, Parikka discusses media archaeology’s emerging focus on ‘hard’ technological excavation through an analysis that relies on theories and concepts from German media theorist Friedrich Kittler. This chapter interprets some of the key points emerging from ‘new materialism’ and ‘German media theory’ as a response to the more cultural-theoretical perspectives originating from media archaeology’s humanist roots (as seen in the earlier chapters of the book, on sense and affect for example). This line of reflection leads *What is Media Archaeology?* to partly define its field in terms of an opposition between cultural and material approaches.

Present in Parikka’s discussion of ‘hard media’ in Chapter 4, but also evident in the second chapter on film theory and new film history, is the idea that media archaeology is gradually shifting its emphasis from the immaterial textual aspects of media culture to a more ‘media specific’ reading of the mathematical structures underlying actual hardware and software. This transition resonates more broadly with media studies’ burgeoning interest in technically rigorous ways of understanding the operationality of material technologies, seen in works such as Matthew Kirschenbaum’s *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (2008) and Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost’s ‘Platform Studies’ book series (see: Montfort and Bogost 2009). Parikka is not the only media archaeologist who has noted a distinction between cultural and material concerns; other authors (Chun 2006; Ernst 2006, 2013; Huhtamo 2013; Parikka 2011) have written portentously of the essential division between ‘new materialism’ and the discursive school of thought. In *What is Media Archaeology?* Parikka merely reinforces these divisions by further demarcating the borders among approaches. The latter chapters are similarly divided, with a focus on noise, archive dynamics and practical applications of media archaeology as an art method. This structure seems to suggest that media archaeology should be considered a layered methodology with an uncomplicated hierarchy of distinctive applications. This gives rise to a possible tension between Parikka’s aim in the book to provide a ‘proper’ disciplinary hierarchy, and media archaeology’s inherent resistance to assimilation within such a scheme.

Parikka’s conceptualisation of media archaeology as a more hierarchical and less organic scheme is at once the book’s most admirable and problematic theme. As I have shown, the chapter structure of *What is Media Archaeology?* is based on the assumption that there is an essential separation between the discipline’s multiple spheres. For instance, the so-called ‘German media theory’ and ‘new materialism’ are represented as counterparts to the more poetic, cultural frameworks already established by media archaeologists such as Zielinski and Huhtamo. With no overall consensus about how one should think media archaeologically, the allocation of authors into separate and ‘opposing’ schools of thought (e.g. ‘German’ new materialists, cultural historians), can be seen as an attempt to ‘brand’ the field and make it a more serviceable methodology for academic researchers. Although Parikka does acknowledge the inherent problems associated with placing theorists under the rubric of ‘German media theory’ (2012, p. 66), his analysis seems no less intent on relying on such normalising frameworks.

As noted earlier, part of the reason for this emphasis on structure and hierarchy can be viewed as a response to media archaeology’s more ‘anarchic’ traditions, seen in books like Zielinski’s *Deep Time of the Media* (2006) and even Eric Kluitenberg’s *The Book of Imaginary Media* (2007). This kind of anarchism has been described as corrosive to the criteriological doctrines of contemporary media studies (Huhtamo & Parikka 2011, pp. 10-12). Perhaps as a response to this criticism, *What is Media Archaeology?* takes up the task of condensing the field into a more institutionally palatable theoretical framework. This vision of media archaeology as a simple, hegemonic hierarchy is in tension with the

discipline's formative agenda, which was to privilege disciplinary freedom, non-linearity and experimental research practices. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that Parikka dedicates only a few pages to addressing these traditions of media archaeology as they originate in theories such as Zielinski's (an)archaeology/variantology of the media (Parikka, 2012, pp. 11-12).

Parikka also seems to exhibit a slight preference for the new materialist direction of media archaeology over the more traditional areas of cultural analysis covered in the earlier sections of the book. For example, "the future media archaeologist" may be surprised to read that they should consider beginning their excavations "not by going to an archive filled with documents and books", but by "open[ing] up a PC from the 1980s, inspect[ing] its circuit board, and start[ing] forensics work on the hard drive" (p. 88). It seems to be taken for granted that material conceptions of media archaeology are threatening to abstract media from their social contexts in the direction of a 'post-humanist' trajectory. And of course, there is no denying that this trajectory has much to offer. The various forms of post-humanist thought raise legitimate questions about our understanding of contemporary media culture that cannot be answered using classical forms of humanist inquiry. Yet, as Erkki Huhtamo shows in a recent book on the archaeology of the moving panorama (2013), the cultural and social dimensions that shape our understanding of media and media-in-practice are just as relevant now as they have been in the past.

Despite these issues, *What is Media Archaeology?* provides a topical and pertinent introduction to the various discussions and debates occurring inside the field of media archaeology today. Parikka's capacity to critically engage with theorists from across the humanities, as well as his perceptive ability to synthesise their work into a sophisticated and multilayered methodology, brings a solid framework to the discipline of media archaeology. What this book does well, therefore, is provide insight on how to grasp the specificity of media in archaeological terms, through clarification of the principle themes in media archaeological research. In this sense, *What is Media Archaeology?* should be considered a kind of textbook approach to the archaeological method in media and cultural studies, whose purpose is to guide readers towards methodological schemes suitable for application to their own research initiatives.

Students seeking to use this book as an introduction to media archaeology should be wary of boxing themselves inside or outside any one of the approaches it covers. Media archaeology has a history of resisting disciplinary description and it is important to continue to recognise this tradition as crucial to the discipline's continued development. With its emphasis on presenting media archaeology in the form of a structured typology of research agendas, *What is Media Archaeology?* can be viewed as a retreat from this tradition. Yet this retreat is an equally welcome contribution to a field whose basic principles have proved inadequate for the building of a solid theoretical framework. In this context, Parikka's book is an important step for media archaeology because it sharpens the field into an accessible set of methodologies suitable for any student undertaking a media archaeological approach. This is in stark contrast to the discipline's origins as a rebellious practice accessible only to those with the tenure necessary to make worthwhile use of its enigmatic premises.

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## Biographical Statement

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