

*Review of*

**Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive*. Jussi Parikka ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.**

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In *Digital Memory and the Archive* Jussi Parikka introduces the first collection of Wolfgang Ernst's writing to be made available in English. This book reflects, and further expands, a growing body of work on media archaeology. Media archaeology tends to focus less on the analysis of media content than the devices themselves in order to explore the relationship between technical capacities and the conditions of living with media. Ernst's volume is timely because, I suspect, presently there is considerable curiosity, confusion and possibly anxiety toward a loose-knit assembly of media theorists, some with German heritage. So for some readers the context around the publication of this book will be as interesting as its methodological and theoretical contributions. Increasingly, at conferences and workshops, I have overheard patchy characterisations of German media theory or the Berlin school. These are, it appears, simplifications with mythologies that place Friedrich Kittler as the patriarch. Against this, Parikka's opening essays in *Digital Memory* provide essential primers to media archaeology while his book *What is Media Archaeology?* (see Barreneche, 2013) is a noted antidote to ill or uninformed suspicion and speculation.

*Digital Memory* is organised in three parts comprising ten essays by Ernst, one of which is an original text for the volume. Ernst may not have originally intended on publishing this body of work together but there is a consistency to the book that reflects the coherence of his project and the insight of the editor. In addition to Parikka's essays there is an appendix featuring Ernst interviewed by Geertz Lovink. This provides a more personal view on his relation to philosophy, his discovery of "real" archives, and his own domestic media-archaeological practices. The grounds for Ernst's intervention are set out in the two essays that constitute part one entitled The Media-Archaeological Method. The two subsequent parts are dedicated to media archaeological analysis and developing a theory of the temporal logic of archives, for an insightful review of this aspect of the book see Cavender (2012).

I will briefly outline what I consider to be the major intervention of the book and how this potentially contributes to the intersecting study of media, culture and memory. Extant literature here includes Garde-Hansen (2011), Van Dijk (2007), Winter (2012), and the edited collections Garde-Hansen et al. (2009) and Neiger et al. (2011). On the surface it is Ernst's appetite for technical exegesis that differentiates his work from these others. This is a debt to Kittler, but the essays that make up *Digital Memory* are not confessions of a technophile. Echoing Wendy Chun's emphasis on the distinction between memory and storage, Ernst holds that digital memory is part of 'a physical layer below symbolically expressed culture' (p.61) that is different in kind from the selective and transformative caprices of human memory. He is unsympathetic toward projects that conflate these categories. So Ernst's media archaeologist will be unmoved by mnemotechnical uses of media, cognitive distribution, mediated memory

narratives and intermedial representations of the past. What is more, according to Ernst, interpreting such things risks ‘applying musicological hermeneutics’ that fail to suppress ‘the passion to hallucinate “life” into media (p.60). In this respect Ernst goes beyond Chun to identify archives in the production of culture while rejecting phenomenological, anthropological and semiotic approaches to its study. The problem, he explains using the example of acoustic data, is that ‘the human ear always already couples the physiological sensual data with cognitive cultural knowledge, thus filtering the listening act’ only ‘the [technical] apparatus unsemantically “listens” to the acoustic event (p.61). Media are the only perfect archaeologists of media. Short of this, our all too human inability to receive archival media in their own terms is to be supplemented with Foucault’s archaeology, from which Ernst derives an ‘epistemological reverse engineering’ (p.55) in order to excavate ‘the technological conditions of the sayable and thinkable in culture’ (p.195). This leads Ernst to some rather polemic conclusions about the future of cultural studies, most notably that ‘signal processing will replace discourse and cultural semiotics in the age of (new) media’ (p.39).

To summarise Ernst offers media archaeology as the technical study of archival media for which signal is the unit of analysis. He characterises the sensibility of the student of archival media, drawing on McLuhan, as the “cold gaze” of media archaeology. A tension of the book is that Ernst does not always extend the same hospitality to the philosophical and literary sources he uses as the technical details he explores. To give one example, drawing on Lacan, Ernst argues that archival media produce a “multimedia mirror effect” that distorts linear temporal order, but he does not consider how this and other media effects relate to concepts associated with Lacan’s mirror stage. Perhaps this is why Parikka playfully brands Ernst’s media archaeology as a kind of “post-structuralist positivism” to emphasise the media archaeologists insistence on the media artefact at the centre of analysis with theory as an amplifier. This book, and Ernst’s project, will draw criticisms of apoliticism. Against this readers should note that Ernst prioritises Foucault’s ethical politics over other formalised versions of politics to pursue the ‘desire to be freed by machines from one’s own subjectivity’ (p.69); the reader will have their own view on whether this counts as politics or not. To close I will highlight what Ernst modestly states is the *telos* of media archaeology, in his words ‘this technoascetic approach is just another method we can use to get closer to what we love in culture’ (p.72). It is not stated exactly what there is to love in culture. Lacan’s view on desire is cautionary here, alluding to both the enjoyment and suffering of a love that our archival culture can never requite in quite the way we want it to. Alternatively, reading *Digital Memory* alongside Bernard Stiegler’s (2014) pharmacological approach suggests the ways in which archival media are amongst the “transitional objects” that, to borrow the French philosophers words, ‘make life worth living.’

Barreneche C (2013) Book Review: Jussi Parikka, What Is Media Archaeology?.

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