MEDIA ARCHAEOLOGY (INTERVIEW HILL)

[Interview by Thomas Hill, Vassar College, Dept. of Art,
Poughkeepsie, N. Y., on occasion of W. E., *Digital Memory and the
Archive*, in the academic radio program *Library Cafe*,
http://library-cafe.org; can be individually pod-casted]

1. Can you describe in general terms media archaeology as a field
of study or method of inquiry?

- Allow me to describe media archaeology first of all from **what it
is not,** to avoid misunderstandings. It is not primarily about
digging out obsolte "dead" media from the past in order to
remember variantological alternatives (to take a term coined by my
colleague, the media archaeologist Siegfried Zielinski).

- the **"arche" in the term *archaeolog*y** does not exclusively refer
to origins but as well to principles, to structures; media
archaeology thus aims at revealing the essential principles which
drive media in the technological sense (both material hardware and
symbolic software)

- work out those technological elements which (beyond the special
knowledge of engineers and matheamticians and computer scientists)
are worth of knowledge in a philosophical and cultural sense

2. Can you talk about what media archaeology tells us or assumes
about the nature of archives and other institutions of memory?

- First of all such memory agencies are not about the past but
radically present. **Develop a theory of storage, not confuse with
"cultural memory"** or even human "remembrance". Archives, libraries
and museums are **symbolical machines**.

- At the same time, **differentiate between** respositories of
material objects (museums), places of unique records (archives)
and collections of public reproductive knowledge (libraries)

- The nature of archives has changes when **signal recording (like
phonography) rivaled the textual records**.

3. You have a wonderful chapter or essay in your book entitled "In
Defense of Antiquarianism" where you talk about antiquarianism as
an approach to the past that we need to revisit. Can you
talk about this? How did antiquarianism come to be considered
antiquated as a way of doing history? To what extent is modern
historiography a media effect?

- Antiquarians practice(d) **"material philolology"** (the
archaeologist Eduard Gerhard) "material" analysis ("forensic
analysis" in terms of Matthew Kirschenbaum), not subjecting

notions of the past to textual knowledge only. Exemplary study:
Gilbert Simondon, in his book on the Existence of Technical
Objects, carefully analyzed the Themionic Tube (the Triode) - the
device which gave rise to the meaning of "electronics" (different
from mere energetic electrics)

- The antiquarian "sense of the past" is **not subjected to master
narratives** of historiography

4. Do you see your methodology as a corrective to traditional
history as well as to the kind of cultural analysis that has
become the norm in scholarship in the humanities across the
disciplines?

- Indeed. While archival document criticism and the historical
method of organizing past data is necessary and plausible in
remembering cultural pasts, it is **not the only way to model past
times**. There is a shift of emphasis; to take an example from sonic
archaeology: the phonographic collection of early voice recordings
(**Lautarchiv**) based at Humboldt University, Berlin. The Lautarchiv
encompasses a) famous voices, b) truly archival recordings of
local speech dialects, and c) recordings for musical ethnology
(mostly Africans and Indians from the French and British Army in
the World War One *Halbmond* prisoner camp at Wünsdorf south of
Berlin). The phonological target was inscribed into the Lautarchiv
by its promotor Wilhelm Doegen from the beginning -
notwithstanding the circumstances of its coming-into-being with
recordings in a prisoner camp. **While cultural analysis
concentrates on this ambivalent historical and discursive context**,
with a different epistemological vantage point media archaeology
lends its ears to knowledge which can be derived from the actual
media articulation contained in the technical archive itself.

5. How can one build a representation or narrative about the past,
or about culture, without being discursive about it, without being
especially textual? Is this a matter of curatorship or
assemblage? Would it be preferable to allow cultural objects to
speak for themselves, by focusing more on providing contexts for
this perhaps and less on interpretation?

- Even media archaeological argumentation as academic method is
still verbal or textual. But it allows for non-discursive matters
to be recognized. Technical media have becomes "time objects"
(Edmund Husserl) in themselves, they enact the drama of signalling
past to present, such like Enrico Caruso's voice from an ancient
gramophone recording all of the sudden is being experienced as
radically present voice when listening (the media-induced affect,
media *generating presence* in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's term), or **re-
presencing** (Vivian Sobchack)

6. I'm wondering about what kinds of mental habits, predelictions, drives, compulsions, etc. might dispose a person to be good at doing this kind of research. You write that historically archaeology has been associated with engraving. And I suspect this desire to dig into things is akin to the desire to "tinker" **[= "basteln"]** – to see how things work. Can you talk about what motivates you to ask the questions you do about the objects you study?

- May I refer to **late Friedrich Kittler**, the founder or the kind of "Germanic" media studies well known now as "materialist approach" or even "technological determinism". Among his bequested papers which are now at the National Archive of Literature in Marbach in Germany there is a quite material text: 5 electronic devices, the modular Moog syntheciser he contructed in the early 80s. Next week an academic workshop will discuss how to cope with such a new type of "texts" which consists of circuit diagrams and **solded electronics.** Apparently Kittler did not construct this in order to generate electronic music himself but he saw tinkering as a method of analyzing and understanding electronic media. Of course it takes media archaeology to open these boxes for close diagrammatic reading. This has nothing to do with archaeological metaphors but rather with technical analysis of what we call media. This corresponds with the contemporary **Retro Computing Scene** which does not simply emulate old computer games on new platforms but actually opens the black box of ancient computers for close analysis of their micro-temporal behavious which once constituted all the computer game aesthetics we faintly remember.

7. Can you talk about agency here and the question of causality? Obviously the heroic figure of the inventor doesn't loom largely in your understanding of invention. Is invention a matter of technological necessity - of machines containing the germs of their own evolution?

- Inventors themselves are media of knowledge; both machinic and mathematical logics; **Pythagorean monochord**

- There are symptomps of an un-easiness with the domeinant historical model or oganizing knowledge about times past: **non-linear temporal interrelations** (the "temporal fold": Deleuze in accordance with Leibnis) as a function of *online*-accessability of data banks and archives; **"rekursions" (Kittler); "resonances" (McLuhan)**

8a. We had on our program a while ago the media historian Geoffrey Bowker, who stated that the way we conceive and practice science is historically bound up with developments in information technology as these developments influence notions of archiving and our understanding of knowledge itself. For instance, he made the point that Charles Lyell's theory that geologic change is the

result of minute ongoing microevents taking place over great
expanses of time, which itself provided a basis for his friend
Darwin's theory of natural history, was conditioned by
the widespread adoption of double-entry bookkeeping in the early
nineteenth century.

- see discussion on **entropy** (the second law of thermodynamics) as
law of history / evolution which came into existence not by
emphatic philosophy of history (such as G. W. F. Hegel's) but by
Hegel's contemporary Carnot theorizing about the minimal energy
loss in machine work.

8b. And I wonder if you could talk about the question that arises
whenever we talk about technological influence: which comes first,
technology or cultural discourse? Is history a story of stark
breaks and discontinuities triggered by technological invention,
or is it a matter of slowly evolving social and political values
setting the stage, so to speak, for technological change, or is it
something else? Does your discussion of the origins of radio and
media temporality bear on this?

- **Co-emergence of technical logics and subjective human knowledge**.
Technology needs humans to become explicit, although (like in
Psychoanalytic practice) being there already in latency. This
might sound like **neo-Platonic** *anamnesis*

- **History of science still subjects technical media to the overall
embrace of history** as discourse. Media archaeology takes the other
point of view, emphacizing the "non-human agencies" as Bruno
Latour calls it: the proper time (**Eigenzeit** in physics) of
technical media.

9. The term I hear most often spoken in academe at the moment on
which practioners of the liberal arts seem to be pinning all hope
of future relevance is "**the digital humanities**." And there
are projects underway and whole departments being assembled across
the globe to promote the increasing use of computers in the arts
across the disciplines. And librians are often assiged
to these projects, which tend to be interdisciplinary and
collaborative, as metadata experts - since classification is
essential still for data retrieval. But I wonder, especially as we
start digitizing and processing media such as film and sound
recordings, about the classification component of these projects.
If, as you write, signal processing is replacing discourse in our
media practices, should we be looking to create a new kind of
archive?

- the **algorithmic archive; cultural analysis is replaces by big
data cultural analytics**.

- As expressed by the think tank of the Norwegian National Library

in Oslo – the **"archive in motion"**. A c**urrent case is the NSA discussion: "predictive analytics"** does not accumulate data from a long past but collect present data to predict immediate future profiles – thus historicizing the future already (the "future in the past"); **new forms of time manipulation**

– **new options of sound-based sound retrieval,** based on the signal qualities, not its logocentristic transcriptions (and subjection to metadata)

10. Does your research into media shed any light on the future of the book? Will the internet make the conventional book obsolete, the way it seems to be doing with conventional broadcast media?

– difference between **book as material storage medium for symbol transmission** and as a (data) **format** (like the ancient codex with single pages different from the papyrus scroll). It will be dis-continuously "migrated" to new carriers and interfaces – each time a **"catastrophe"** (data loss).

– On a more fundamental media-archaeological level, there is a **return of the printed alphabet –** which seemed to be out-dated by signal recording and transmission in audio-vosual media leke the phonograph and electronic radio and television broadcasting – **within computing** as alpha-numeric source code and strings in computer programing; a unit of bits is even called "word" (even if this new alphabet disguised under the appearance of digital sound and images).

– As a kind of **retro-effect** of online-access to knowledge ("open access") the material book gains strengh as **enduring object.**

– Conventional broadcast media will disintegrate into online services, while preserving the essential quality of edited, thus_ trustworthy information, and preserving a temporal quality: not simply individualized access on demand, but a time-structured program which introduced a temporal "ritual" into every day commuincation – which the symbolical order called culture needs.

Example: this (Thomas Hill's) weekly Radio program *The Library Cafe* (Vassar College, Hudson Valley) "interviews with scholars about the formation and cicutlatin of knowledge";

recorded off-line and the slightly edited: time-shifted for broadcast, "pedning of the interviewer's approval of the final edit."