Of Insects, Machines and Post-truths
Interview with Jussi Parikka

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How did you become interested in media theory? Which projects are you working on right now?

It was a gradual development. I started studying at University of Turku in Finland in the mid 1990s; first it was political history, then cultural history with minors in philosophy and sociology. Luckily studying in Finland was (and still is) free – supported by the government, and encouraging in the all best ways to explore, think and wonder what is the best combination for oneself instead of the current customer model what we have in the UK for example. It narrows choices and curiosity.

I later thought I should have studied literature too but I anyway ended up on the route to media theory via historical studies and humanities. I did some work on cyberpunk and technology in science fiction like I guess so many in my generation did, and I was also bitten by the "bug" of theories of Friedrich Kittler, Gilles Deleuze, Paul Virilio thanks to the professor in film and media studies, Jukka Sihvonen. Reading those authors, and then gradually materialist feminists like Rosi Braidotti as well as a lot of literature in Science and technology studies (STS) was really transformative for me as it expanded my interests in history into the methods of how to think media history as media archaeology.

I had a good role model also in Erkki Huhtamo who had studied cultural history earlier. I believe he had already moved to Los Angeles that time before I arrived as a student. He was teaching at UCLA, but the sort of niche he carved out was important: one can do media studies from the perspective of cultural history and that it starts to resonate with the things happening in media theory

for example in Germany. Later when doing my PhD in the early 2000s I was able to be a visiting PhD student and researcher at University of Amsterdam where Thomas Elsaesser's cinema seminar was a great experience; I also got to visit Braidotti's seminars in Utretch at times. Then I spent some time in Berlin at Humboldt University media studies where I met Wolfgang Ernst for the first time and started to understand this other side of media archaeology. It's this geography and this traveling that was influential for me in many ways: to mix methodologies and disciplines, to combine them and to start producing different syntheses.

Currently I am working on a couple of projects. One of them is on laboratories and it is a co-written book and a larger project with Lori Emerson and Darren Wershler. We are interested in offering an answer – and perhaps also a method – to the question as to why there are so many labs in contemporary humanities and media? Where did this enthusiasm for labs start and what sort of genealogies of the humanities lab can one write? How does it fit in the current emphasis of digital infrastructures and digital humanities while keeping in mind the media archaeological labs like the one I visited in Berlin already in 2006 (Berlin Media Archaeological fundus) and that Lori and Darren host, alongside many other colleagues. You can read more about that project online and also get access to the interview with many labs! http://whatisamedialab.com/.

Then I am involved in a project on something very different: archaeologies of fashion film. It's a project that puts contemporary post-cinematic cultures of fashion and moving image into a conversation with very early cinema and especially the lesser known topic of fashion films. I have the pleasure to work with the great colleagues from Central St. Martins art school in London: professor Caroline Evans, and researchers Marketa Uhlirova and Lucy Moyse Ferreira.

Another project takes me away from media archaeology. This one is on operative images, a term from the film maker Harun Farocki, but in my case placed in the context of contemporary visual cultures of environmental imaging, machine learning and the planetary large scale surfaces that turn into alternative kinds of screens. While it touches the visual, data, technology triad, it emerges also from the perspective of artistic research: it's a collaboration with the artist Abelardo Gil Fournier from Madrid who is really an

inventive artist and expert on many of these questions.

You have frequently highlighted the transdisciplinary status of media archaeology. Even if the potential of this transdisciplinary openness has been acknowledged on several occasions, do you believe that this "nomadism" may also become counterproductive?

I understand your question well. It is also something that comes up at times in critiques of media archaeology: what is it really if it is so nomadic, so transdisciplinary? I think we need to remember that media archaeology was never really just one thing. It has multiple genealogies and hence different uses: it was important for new film history work that started to engage with early and pre-cinema in new ways; it was important for the 1990s artistic work that started excavating alternative sources of media than just the digital; it became a way to investigate the long histories of the digital; and for many theorists it produced alternative methodologies of dealing with time from Huhtamo's idea that media historical topics are recurring to Ernst's ideas that technical media is governed by microtemporalities that are different than investigating media as placed in history. There's a fruitful philosophical discussion about history vs. archaeology (thanks to Giorgio Agamben, also Knut Ebeling) and the likes of Janet Harbord have explicated the idea of film archaeology based on Agamben. Giuliana Bruno's work was an earlier entry point to film, maps, visual culture, architecture and art history that spoke of archaeologies of film. So there's a lot there and part of the transdiscplinarity is about this multiplicity: media archaeology is really a generic term that often does not explain so much as it needs to be specified: "what do you mean by that?".

I have found it useful as a way to think beyond history. This is not dismissal of historical methodologies or archival work – far from it – but to remember that history is not the only temporality in town. Here I echo Ernst but I think this has wider philosophical touching points too, not least in the sense many material feminists that I admire and read were articulating a materiality of temporal duration as the bases of their ontological stance. This is Grosz, this is Braidotti, this is in some ways also the impact of Barad and others!

It has been noted that media archaeology has tended to exhibit a markedly "Western" or "Westernising" approach. There have also been some recent initiatives to correct this in an attempt to rethink the geopolitics

of media archaeology so as to consider a wider geographical field. How do you think it would possible to construct this broader perspective?

I think what is said about it being a Western approach applies... pretty much to most of the humanities, no? In other words, the legacy of a lot of our theoretical work and methods is bootstrapped into a hegemony of university models that are pretty western. Hence the issue does not concern only media archaeology per se, but the broader field in which it also has to think where it can go – and where it came from. As you mention, there's a lot of potential there: for example the Variantology project and book series has done work in expanding to contexts of Southern America, Middle East and China in excavating alternative histories of media, art and science. I am seeing interesting things happening in many places outside the Western institutions. One I am involved in is the new Media Archaeology Lab in Ankara, Turkey. So the question becomes how do we not only expand the scope of media archaeology to write the non-Western contexts inside the themes and approaches, but how do we need to think some institutional basis in terms of geopolitics of location and how do we need to think methods that take into account what post-colonial theory taught us and what the decolonize the curriculum movement is doing. This is indeed the sort of theoretical critique we all need to take seriously and insert the agenda from thinkers such Anibal Quijano into the epistemological, methodological and ontological of media theory: what are the forms of reproduction that disciplines practice, and in which ways they are part of the colonial rationality that persists much after "colonialism" in its earlier forms was meant to be gone.

One example of recent work relates to this broader theme that you pick up on. With Ayhan Aytes, I ran a project at the Istanbul Design Biennial 2016 on the Middle Eastern contexts of automata from the early 9th century to 13th century but putting this historical context in a discussion with speculative design methodologies. It become also a way to investigate politics of time and history in a difficult context of Turkey where politics of history are part of the everyday regime anyway with the wave of romanticizing neo-ottomania! Ayhan is an incredibly talented design and media scholar and educator whose own work is about Orientalism in histories of AI and robotics, and we wanted to give stage to thinking about alternative imaginaries of temporality in the Middle East and Turkish context.

So, as an answer to your question: it is possible and it is necessary. It also includes the need to expand outside the usual genealogies of theory to be aware of what else we investigate and write into our theoretical infrastructures; and in which ways theoretical positions might reproduce forms of troubling racialization and domination.

It is clear that you don't underestimate the importance of philosophical traditions and critical theory. But you have also stressed the significance of promoting the understanding of the material practices that are the subject of media archaeology. How important do you believe it is for a media archaeologist to have a specific training regarding the materiality of the media?

Could we talk of both training and also perhaps infrastructure, intellectual furnishings (to borrow Shannon Mattern's term)? In other words, training is one formal thing we need to think about — how to train into methodologies that are more than textual analysis or something else than the usual social sciency quantitative vs. qualitative division? Celia Lury and others (in the *Routledge Handbook for Interdisciplinary Methods*) point out the usefulness to think methods as practices — forms of doing; this is also important in our training that then starts to build on theoretical positions that pay attention to materials and to problematize what is meant by materials — what sort of materiality are we dealing with? Is materiality only things you touch, see, things that object? Or is it also something else in the physical realm (signal traffic is material for sure)? What are the stakes in the material histories and analysis since Marx and later thinkers of political economy and cultural geography, spatial materialism of cultural studies in the style fo Grossberg and indeed, the already mentioned material feminists? Materiality is not itself a solution but the field on which we need to think our methods. For me, also environmental issues are crucial in this context.

This also relates then to intellectual furnishings (Mattern) and architectonics of theory (to riff on Giuliana Bruno's idea): where do we do our work, with what sort of infrastructure, space, and social relations? What's in the space and situation that is part of my methodology and doing? Concretely this would mean for example the role research collections — such as in media archaeology labs or examples such as the Montreal Concordia University's Residual Media Depot — play again. It's infrastructure for theory.

Do you think media archaeology can produce alternative ways of understanding reality which differ from our subjective views of the world? The discussion of non-human materialities has been a recurring concern throughout your work. However, you also advocate for a perspective that shows what media archaeology does, and art seems to be a privileged place for the subject to play, interact o alter media. What role does the subject play in media archaeology? Is it possible to conceive an approach that disregards subjectivity, its concepts and schemes of thought?

Well this is something dependent on what one means by media archaeology, right? Some of the work does speak to a lot of non-human and posthuman theory, but media archaeology is a broad field. For me, questions of non-human have been indeed central and ways of expanding from the assumed centrality of the human (male) agency to the multiplicity of forces that defines the cultural and technological field. For example, my Insect Media – subtitled indeed "an archaeology of animals and technology"- was meant as such a dip both into the cultural history of insets and other animals as they feature in the technological world from 19th century to contemporary software culture. But it was also underpinned by the idea that instead of the assumption that technologies are extensions of Man, they are much more radical extensions of non-human forces that are captured and transmitted in different ways in modern worlds of technology. In ways this also resonated again with some feminist theories interested in finding alternatives to the anthropocentric epistemology.

Of course, in Friedrich Kittler's influential media theoretical work, the question of the subject is already put into question. Instead, Kittler was always interested at best in the so-called-Man, the sort of a historical figure that emerges as a function of media technologies from cinema to computing, typewriting to radio. It's a variation on the radical historicisation that Michel Foucault established, although Kittler's version also then received a lot of critique: does this lack of a stable subject mean then a lack of politics? Of course, this is not the case (even if for other reasons, Kittler's work has its own shortcomings and blindspots). One can say that I am also interested in a broad reconfiguring the scope and the history of the subject but alongside some other critical projects as already mentioned – animal studies and

environmental humanities being one.

You have made frequent allusions to other media archaeologists and media artists throughout your work. However, you and many other media theorists also show a clear interest in literary imagination and its relation to the invention or representation of the effects of different media. What do you think the role of literature and literary studies in media archaeology has been?

If one accepts the position that a lot of media archaeological work emerges in Friedrich Kittler's work, literary studies is then already smuggled inside this branch of media theory. Kittler started as a Germanist, as a student and scholar of German language and literature, and as such was part of a particular way of training into the humanities. His radical way of rethinking language was part of the inspiration that came across the border from the French side: the 1960s wave of theories of language from Derrida to Foucault. This decentering of the speaking man into the sort of supplement, the-so-called man is then a very poststructuralist move with a good bit of McLuhan and Nietzsche thrown in for good measure. Literature is central to many of the things that Kittler then focuses on – not least the passage from the 1800-training system of learning into language as something that he coins "The Mother's Mouth" and then to the discourse network 1900 and the fragmented modernist technological world that is captured in key technologies like the discrete mechanics of the typewriter and then later the automation brought about by the Turing machine. Kittler is constantly centering on language and literature (not least Pynchon), but also mapping its thresholds where it turns into something else than human readable language. Hence, computers, machine vision, machine reading enter the fray.

Subsequently, lots of interesting things has happened by literary scholars. I am holding here the lovely book Iron Whim on fragmented history of the typewriter by Darren Wershler. The other collaborator in the Lab Book, Lori Emerson, is a literary scholar running a Media Archaeology Lab. The most interesting sides of Digital Humanities are for me the things represented by scholars such as Matthew Kirschenbaum who has extended literary and bibliographic scholarship into a dialogue with media theory in his work on Forensics and recently when writing about word processing. In Germany, one finds similar research. One I want to mention is Eva Horn's work *The Secret*

War – a great book on treason and espionage in modern fiction! So, building on the idea of literature (and books) as an information system there's a lot of work that has continued and complexified this media archaeological turn in literary studies and language.

The debate on the link between media and politics has taken on a new dimension in recent years. To what extent do you think media archaeology helps us reflect on (or act in relation to) phenomena such as post-truth politics, fake news or the use of big data?

This is such a timely question as we are preparing a grant proposal with colleagues on practices of truth! So we have been thinking exactly this question recently. One rather direct answer is: current interest in post-truth is both a reminder that truth has a history – and a material history one might add – and it is always a technology, a technique. The contextualisation of truth as part of technology and infrastructure of knowledge is of course a move we recognize from earlier work in STS and media archaeology is close to that camp in many ways. The idea that media are also part of history of epistemic practices facilitates a dialogue with STS and it also articulates a point about truth always being practiced in historical conditions. It is not a relativisation of truth per se, but a recognition that truth is always mediated. While big data and AI are playing an increasing role in the systematic practices of manipulation, questioning and politics of doubt (here Naomi Oreskes' work is excellent). I also think that a great guide to understanding the other side of communication as always about manipulation, trickstery and deception is to read Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey's book *Evil Media.*

One critique of media archaeology in its certain forms has been that it is not political enough. But I think there's a lot of potential in that direction too, to develop historicising insights into the uses and abuses of technologies of knowledge, to address those colonial forms of power that tested how data is essential for management of people already much earlier before the digital, to link question of technology to how they already earlier manipulated what we see, hear, and understand. Hence, the media archaeological interest in other knowledges – the media histories of paranoia, hallucination, lying, trickstery, misperception and faking – are part of the wider repertoire in which post-truth always already was.