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# From Media Archaeology to Media Genealogy

An Interview with Erkki Huhtamo

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In this interview with Simon Ganahl, Erkki Huhtamo talks about his education and early works in Finland, the emergence of 'media archaeology' in the 1990s, and his focus on topoi in media history. By tracing these cultural patterns, Huhtamo actually switches from an archaeological to a genealogical approach. He emphasizes, however, that he is doing careful historical research—unlike Foucault as well as Friedrich Kittler and Jonathan Crary, who are, according to Huhtamo, "superimposing models from the present on the past and hence mistreating historical reality."

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archaeology, dispositif, foucault, genealogy, huhtamo, materiality, media, vision

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Fig. 1: Erkki Huhtamo in his office in the Broad Art Center at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), surrounded by optical devices from the 19th century (photo by Simon Ganahl, May 27, 2016).

## 1. The Emergence of Media Archaeology

**Simon Ganahl:** Let's begin with the time before you came to the University of California, Los Angeles, where you have taught and researched on media history and media art since 1999. You were born in Helsinki and you studied at the University of Turku. Can you elaborate on your early influences there?

**Erkki Huhtamo:** Like a few other internationally recognized scholars of media culture, I graduated from the University of Turku in Finland, where I first studied world literature, but soon switched to cultural history and cultural anthropology as well as art history and art theory. So from the beginning, my interests covered the histories of visual and text-based culture. Equally important was, however, that I had been a kind of media activist since my teenage years. With a friend in high school, I founded a film club, got a permission to rent 16-mm films and showed them in the school auditorium. Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* was one of the hits. Influenced by Allen Ginsberg and Frank Zappa, I also produced underground poetry and magazines sold on streets, and played in one of the first Finnish punk rock bands.

In my historical studies at the university, I specialized in the early modern period. Sponsored by a scholarship, I moved to Rome to work on a master's thesis about French travelers to Italy in the second half of the 16th century. The main revelation was that these writers didn't trust in what they saw with their own eyes, but rather repeated cultural formulas and clichés that provided, say, molds for seeing the surrounding world. I bought my copy of Ernst Robert Curtius'

*European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* from the American Book Shop in Rome in 1982.<sup>1</sup> This great book introduced me to so-called topos study — a line of research that later proved important for my own media-archaeological work. For the time being, however, I gathered more experience in contemporary media art, as curator of the MuuMediaFestival in Helsinki, for example. My collaborations with artists like Jeffrey Shaw, Paul DeMarinis, and Ken Feingold had a major impact on the development of my thinking.

The first wave of virtual reality around 1990 was the point where I began to make links between the current media enthusiasm and the 16th century travelogues I had studied in Rome. I wondered if the virtual reality craze might be a topos in the sense of Curtius. This led to a series of research projects that I conducted as an independent scholar in Finland in the 1990s. I basically tried to trace the genealogy of virtual reality from a topos-theoretical perspective. These historical studies were dynamically related works that I was doing as a curator of digital media art in exhibitions as well as in television. *Archaeology of the Moving Image* was a TV series I both wrote and directed for YLE, the Finnish Broadcasting Company, in the mid-1990s, including an accompanying book.

**Ganahl:** Did you already call your approach 'media archaeology' at that time? And had you heard of the media historical work done by Friedrich Kittler and Siegfried Zielinski in Germany?

**Huhtamo:** Yes, I even translated Kittler's short [History of Communication Media](#) into Finnish, and I have known Zielinski since the 1980s. I interviewed him for a Finnish paper when he gave a lecture in Turku, probably in 1989. Zielinski did not speak of 'media archaeology' back then although he later claimed that he had invented the concept. The first time I referred to my historical studies explicitly as 'media archaeology' in a major context was in a keynote lecture that I gave at the International Symposium of Electronic Art in Helsinki in 1994. This speech was later published in slightly modified form in the journal *Leonardo* and in an edited volume titled *Electronic Culture*, next to articles by Kittler, Zielinski, Lev Manovich, Katherine Hayles, Sherry Turkle, and other theorists of digital media.<sup>2</sup>

As usual in the humanities, the concept 'media archaeology' emerged as a combination of various intellectual interests. For many of us, Foucault's *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* were highly influential.<sup>3</sup> These books were clearly an inspiration not only for me, but also for Kittler and Jonathan Crary, who published his controversial study *Techniques of the*

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius: *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask, London: Routledge 1979 [German 1948].

<sup>2</sup> Erkki Huhtamo: From Kaleidoscomaniac to Cybernerd. Towards an Archeology of the Media, in: Timothy Druckrey (ed.): *Electronic Culture. Technology and Visual Representation*, New York: Aperture 1996, pp. 296–303, and in: *Leonardo*, 30/3 (1997), pp. 221–224.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, London: Tavistock 1970 [French 1966]; *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Pantheon Books 1972 [French 1969].

*Observer* in 1990.<sup>4</sup> I read Crary's book almost immediately, and found it both inspiring and irritating. He took too many historical shortcuts to justify his theory in my eyes. Geoffrey Batchen made this clear in a devastating review he contributed to the journal *Afterimage* soon after Crary's book had been published.<sup>5</sup> He pointed out that discussing photography and the huge debates surrounding it would have collapsed Crary's claim about a sharp rupture in visual culture in the 19th century. Photography is absent from *Techniques of the Observer*, probably for a reason.

## 2. Kittler was Never a Historian

**Ganahl:** Speaking of the history of visual culture: we are sitting in your office in the Broad Art Center at UCLA, surrounded by optical devices from the 19th century. Considering your writings, however, I wouldn't say that you fit into the German line of media archaeology, leading from Kittler to Wolfgang Ernst, who is mainly concerned with "the agency of the machine," the material elements of media history.<sup>6</sup> How would you position yourself in relation to German media theory?

**Huhtamo:** I'm not very much connected to this German tradition although I have been reading their works for a long time. I was more influenced by Anglo-American cultural studies but also by the French Annales School, by classics of cultural history like Johan Huizinga, and by cultural semiotics along the lines of Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes. Reading signs for hidden ideological formations is still important for me. After all, I'm a cultural historian by formation, a humanist who is interested in material devices and cultural techniques, but considers them as the outcome of discursive practices, not as factors that determine processes of communication.

Kittler, however, was never a professional historian, and it shows. Foucault was never a historian either, and it shows, too. I certainly understand the critique of these figures, coming from trained historians. Although I am intrigued by Foucault's and Kittler's writings, I cannot trust them when it comes to historical accuracy. Kittler's work is full of mistakes and weird misunderstandings as well as deliberate, playful superimpositions of contemporary ideas on the past. I don't think that Kittler with his brilliant but reckless philosophical mind was interested in a sort of historical exactness I strive for.

He was more interested in projecting his reflections into a historical setting and seeing what emerges from such confrontations. It's a dialogical approach, a play with position-taking. Kittler uses history for other highly personal ends, be they philosophical or polemical. However, Kittler's intellectual world is much broader than Wolfgang Ernst's, who is more narrowly focused

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Crary: *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Batchen: Seeing Things: Vision and Modernity, in: *Afterimage*, 19/2 (1991), pp. 5–7.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Ernst: Let There Be Irony: Cultural History and Media Archaeology in Parallel Lines, in: *Art History*, 28/5 (2005), pp. 583–603, here p. 591.

on technological systems and their supposed agency. I don't share his 'cold gaze' that excludes the kind of discursive interests that occupy me. That's curious, because Wolfgang's academic formation is not very different from mine. He needed to break with it, go in a radically different direction.

**Ganahl:** So you also don't agree with scholars engaged in 'new materialism' who try to describe processes of mediation from the perspective of non-human actors or mediators?<sup>7</sup>

**Huhtamo:** The point is that my understanding of media archaeology has a very strong empirical foundation. I don't have much appreciation for scholarship that is based on shaky factual grounds. In my impression, there seem to be plenty of media theorists, even those who call themselves media archaeologists, who have three shelves of books which they study very deeply, and then write new books based on their deep study of three shelves of books. For me, this is an easy way out. I like to believe that I've taken the hard way out. I made a very serious effort for years to visit archive after archive, and I learned different languages to have the skills to do so. In other words, I approach media archaeology as a historian, not as a philosopher. However, there are also very serious and studious theorists who engage in deep historical research and develop very complex systems of ideas. Bernhard Siegert is one of the foremost.<sup>8</sup> I am inspired by his work although my studies are quite different.

### 3. Topos Study as Media Genealogy

**Ganahl:** Given the richness and diversity of empirical material in your media archaeology, I'd claim the same degree of intellectual rigor in creating and using theoretical concepts. If we don't want to get lost in historical details, we need a perspective, a curiosity driven by contemporary questions. Concepts help us to make sense of data, but we have to be precise and careful with their application and especially with their combination. That's why I'd like to discuss the two parts of this approach that you and other scholars have established since the 1990s: media and archaeology. What is media in media archaeology?

**Huhtamo:** For me, a technological device, a piece of hardware, is not a medium, it cannot be a medium. It only becomes part of media culture when it's put into practice. This practice has material aspects of course, but it also unfolds on much more abstract levels when a medium gets transfigured by the people who use it. This is a question that I explored in my book *Illusions in Motion*, investigating on how the moving panorama could exist on different cultural levels that did not absolutely overlap.<sup>9</sup> Materially, there are colors put on a canvas. But there are also lectured performances where the canvas becomes a medium associated with all kinds of other

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Ian Bogost: *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*, Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press 2012.

<sup>8</sup> See the special issue on "Cultural Techniques", in: *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30/6 (2013).

<sup>9</sup> Erkki Huhtamo: *Illusions in Motion. Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2013.

devices and practices. It is also surrounded by various discourses, advertising, word of mouth. Then on a higher level, religious writers, philosophers, scientists started using the notion of the moving panorama metaphorically. They repeated and varied the idea until it became a topos that may have corresponded only vaguely to the material or performative aspects of the moving panorama.

**Ganahl:** But why do we need to call this setting of material technologies and cultural practices media? From a Foucauldian standpoint, it's a form of knowledge.

**Huhtamo:** Because knowledge requires a transmitting mold, it doesn't exist independently, it's always part of something. This is exactly the problem that Foucault bypassed. He had little to say about media culture and its impact as Kittler pointed out in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*.<sup>10</sup>

**Ganahl:** Not everyone agrees that Foucault ignored this issue. You'll find the typewriter in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and the pen as writing tool in *Discipline and Punish*, for example.<sup>11</sup> But it's true that Foucault wasn't much interested in these questions, probably because media devices don't underlie discourses in his methodology. They are merely visible elements of knowledge forms.

As we are already talking about it, I want to dig deeper into this second part of media archaeology. You mentioned that Foucauldian discourse analysis was highly influential. I wonder, however, if 'media *genealogy*' wouldn't be a more fitting term for your actual research practice.<sup>12</sup> Foucault's archaeology is rather discursive than material and rather synchronic than diachronic. Your media archaeology, by contrast, aims to identify topoi and trace their trajectories up to the present.<sup>13</sup> Isn't this a way of doing genealogy along Foucauldian lines?

**Huhtamo:** My research is equally involved with synchronic and diachronic processes. Obviously, topoi travel in time, but I am not so much interested in the antiquarian question of their origins. I rather explore them in the contexts of their manifestations. Still, I have always been suspicious of Foucault's *episteme*. How does one get from symptomatic traces to a representative whole? How can one make general claims about overwhelming cultural transitions happening at a certain point in time? This is only possible if you deliberately exclude many aspects of that historical reality. As a historian, I was trained to critique such totalistic views of culture. In this respect, Foucault's archaeology actually restores the *Geistesgeschichte*, which he theoretically rejects.

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<sup>10</sup> Friedrich A. Kittler: *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1999 [German 1986], p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> See Michel Foucault: *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, pp. 79–87; *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage 1977 [French 1975], fig. 2.

<sup>12</sup> On this question, see also Alexander Monea and Jeremy Packer: Media Genealogy and the Politics of Archaeology, in: *International Journal of Communication*, 10 (2016), pp. 3141–3159, URL: <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5224/1698>.

<sup>13</sup> Erkki Huhtamo: Dismantling the Fairy Engine: Media Archaeology as Topos Study, in: Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (eds.): *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications and Implications*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 2011, pp. 27–47.

So yes, genealogy is maybe an adequate term for my approach though I don't regard topoi as patterns, as regular repetitions of ideas or practices.

**Ganahl:** But they are patterns, isn't this your point? That certain media clichés occur again and again in history?

**Huhtamo:** Well, a topos may be a cultural pattern, but it doesn't function like a clockwork. These formulas are not submitted to regulatory mechanisms. They appear from time to time, and it's worth asking why they appear at certain times but not others. The answer, however, doesn't stem from macro-level explanations. Culture is a multilayered phenomenon where changes never happen on all layers at once. The relations are too complex to be captured in such general assumptions.

#### 4. Presentism vs. Perspectivism

**Ganahl:** Your remarks confirm my impression that your approach is rather genealogical than archaeological. But the question remains why old or dead media should be excavated in the first place: Does media archaeology lead to what Jussi Parikka called "a curiosity cabinet way of doing media history"<sup>14</sup>?

**Huhtamo:** I don't want to be misunderstood as an antiquarian who discovers artifacts just for their own sake. Ever since my high school days, I have been equally engaged in contemporary cultural activities and in historical research. Generally, I see this as an important problem in line with New Historicism: our presents and our pasts are constantly in relation with each other, constantly explaining and questioning each other. When I explore the moving panoramas, for example, it's not simply because they were forgotten and must be brought back to living memory. I write about them because they are in a dialogue with later phenomena including media experiences from our present day. This is a deeply felt attitude that I share with Foucault, and it's also the guiding idea of the new book I'm writing on what I call 'screenology.'

However, there are risks in this dialogical approach. The main one is superimposing models from the present on the past and hence mistreating historical reality. And as I said, it's not by chance a typical accusation made against Foucault, Kittler, and also Jonathan Crary. Their histories are selective because they are pursuing certain agendas rather than respecting the complexity of a historical moment. In this regard, I'm with micro historians like Carlo Ginzburg who attempt to penetrate a situation back in time, a moment that only exists in the countless traces it has left behind.<sup>15</sup> You have to tie all the traces together in order to grasp this lost and alien

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<sup>14</sup> Jussi Parikka and Garnet Hertz: Archaeologies of Media Art, in: *CTheory* (April 1, 2010), URL: <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=631>.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Carlo Ginzburg: *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 1980 [Italian 1976].



world. I want to be open, show what's there; I don't want to hide or ignore pieces of evidence because they don't fit into my model.

**Ganahl:** I think we need to distinguish between presentism and perspectivism. There is no doubt that an interpretation of the past in terms of the present day is poor historiography. But when do we remain true to a historical moment? Only if we give the full account, a *histoire totale*? Or can we select elements that appear repeatedly and lead up to our present situation? We might call the second approach an immanent typology. You'll find it in Nietzsche, Max Weber, Foucault, and I'd claim also in your own writings. If the topos is a pattern, as you say, can't we consider it a sort of type, a stereotype?

**Huhtamo:** Yes, it is a stereotype, a cliché or schema that molds our experience. But a topos can manifest in many different forms, in material devices as well as in discursive figures. It becomes reinterpreted and reformulated in changing contexts.

**Ganahl:** The diversity of your topos reminds me of the *dispositif*. You know there are two major versions of this influential concept: the ahistorical apparatus theory stemming from Jean-Louis Baudry's *dispositif cinématographique*,<sup>16</sup> and Foucault's historical analysis of patterns of relations that connect heterogeneous elements.<sup>17</sup> I think one of the main challenges of today's media studies is the combination of these diverging applications of the *dispositif* concept.

**Huhtamo:** In the book that I'm writing on 'screenology,' I'm basically treating the *dispositif* as a topos, a kind of model for media practice that gets activated and reinterpreted over and over again. In this sense, *dispositifs* are models for organizing the relationships between the various elements of media usage. Such models are activated by agents of media culture who try to create new gadgets and so on. These are some aspects of my current attempts to historicize the media apparatus or *dispositif*, and to integrate this concept into my way of thinking.

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<sup>16</sup> See Jean-Louis Baudry: *Le dispositif: approches métapsychologiques de l'impression de réalité*, in: *Communications*, 23 (1975), pp. 56–72; and, for example, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (ed.): *Cinematographic Apparatus: Selected Writings*, New York: Tanam Press 1980.

<sup>17</sup> See "le dispositif panoptique" in Michel Foucault: *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*, Paris: Gallimard 1975, pp. 197–229, and "le dispositif de sexualité" in Michel Foucault: *La Volonté de savoir*, Paris: Gallimard 1976, pp. 99–173.