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Book Reviews

Digital Memory and the Archive. Wolfgang Ernst. Ed. Jussi Parikka. Minneapolis and London: U. of Minnesota P., 2012. p/bk 256 pp. ISBN 978-0-8166-7767-2. Price £18.50.

In this collection of Wolfgang Ernst's writings, the first in translation, the archive is identified as the "organizational logic" of contemporary culture, a logic currently subject to radical transformation. In a period in which the storage and processing of data has been effectively outsourced to remote, largely invisible servers, the transformation is one from archive as apparatus, primarily targeted toward the ordering of cultural memory by means of enduring objects, to dynamic archival agency, in which everyday activity is integrated with practices of immediate recovery and reprocessing (95). On the basis of this "implosion of storage into processual data flows" (98), memory becomes transformed, too, to the extent that it can be understood to function in cybernetic terms, that is, as a system of feedback. This collection, part of the consistently excellent Electronic Mediations series, represents one of various new directions in media theory which explore the implications of such transformations. Though aligned to the energies of nascent fields including software studies, digital humanities, and new materialism, Ernst's work is more specifically described as "media archeology", and it is the provocative methodology which underlies this approach that will prove most stimulating to readers more familiar with Anglo-American studies in media and culture.

Ernst admits that there is no consensus on how to define the field or methods of media archaeology. Likewise, as Jussi Parikka emphasizes in his introduction, despite the palpable influence of the late Friedrich Kittler in areas of Ernst's research, any attempt to construct a neatly homogeneous "German media theory" is also problematic. Nonetheless, it is clear that Ernst's archive-oriented method develops from a view that, in the dominant conventions of Anglo-American theory, the role of media in thinking historically has not been adequately grasped. Indeed, Ernst is motivated by a desire to differentiate media studies from its Anglo-American traditions

of cultural critique, and to do this by refocusing on the technical machine. Media archeology is not, then, concerned with cultural histories of media but extends, instead, from 'a close examination of technical media as they actually operate' (25). Ernst's brand of media archaeology emerges from a McLuhanist and unashamedly positivist encounter with Michel Foucault's notion of an "archaeology of knowledge". For Foucault (1972), archaeology is a practice of resistance set against the archival limitation and preemptive governance of what can be expressed. Accordingly, archaeology is not used by Ernst as a metaphor and does not simply concern the excavation of forgotten machinic histories. Rather, media archaeology is concerned with the apparatuses which represent the past as truth, with the technological processes and codes from which this truth is constructed. Confronting the tendency to think history and time in terms of narrative, Ernst focuses on media-generated temporalities, machine-specific times with which our frameworks of knowledge and perception are bound up. All of which situates the function of media archaeology as 'a kind of epistemological reverse engineering' (55).

Parikka's introduction usefully establishes this practice in the context of Ernst's work at Humbolt University's Media Archaeological Fundus, a collection of apparently "dead" historical media devices which, unlike a typical museum, is operationalized through playful tinkering. It is in this sense that Ernst takes seriously the question of media dynamics and agency that is at the center of current debates within the Anglo-American field - for him, interpretation is nothing without doing, a technical artifact "discloses its essence only when operating" (57). The essays in this collection endeavor to analyze such essences, and call upon subjects ranging from photographs to phonographs, from Hertzian waves and electron tubes to cybernetics and the World Wide Web. However, as Ernst makes clear, for the purposes of analysis, the cultural discourses that envelop technological processes must be suspended. Parallel to such tinkering, then, and in apparent contrast to it, Ernst insists that media archaeology must adopt "a hermeneutically distancing look" (25), a "cold gaze" (43). Evidently, the suggestion here is that analysis must target the pre-human level at which technical media records history. And yet, unlike post-human strands in media and cultural theory which, broadly speaking, tend toward an explicit engagement with the social and political, in Ernst's singular focus on technology, the temporalities of the machine remain

outside and almost entirely separate from the human. Quite where the political or social is located ultimately remains unclear.

It goes without saying that the division between theories of social constructivism and technological determinism, where agency either lies with humans or with technical machines, has stymied work within the field for decades. Indeed, as his introductory remarks indicate, Ernst's cold gaze is not blind to this. Specifically, he contends that, in focusing on the "informatized organization of knowledge' (27), any such gaze is, in the Foucauldian and Deleuzian sense, "diagrammatic", serving as an operative map of the generative, as opposed to simply representative, power of technical archives. However, the danger of skewing this gaze toward the concrete machine at the expense of the human machine; that is, at the expense of the "human technology which exists before a material technology" (Deleuze 34), is that the politics which maintains and catalyzes their relation becomes obscured. Beyond Ernst's primarily historical concern, the complexity of contemporary systems - which neither reduce one machine to the other, nor unify them as one - eludes such attempts at unlocking. Nonetheless, this collection does add to the conceptual cache currently employed in the study of how networked social potential, collective memory, and the use of data are both exploited and manipulated by algorithmic processes. As Parikka argues, Ernst's media theory works to "remind us of the longer traditions in, for instance, the United States and the United Kingdom, of cybernetic thought, material media theory, and the collaboration between art and science" (22). For this reason, the book provides a stimulating intervention in debates concerning the challenge of "doing" media studies in the twenty-first century.

Works Cited

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