Four times (of) media archaeology (reading reflection/basis for discussion)

Here follows a reading reflection/basis for discussion for the first session of the 2017 Media Archaeology Summer School. It will be introduced by a short presentation where I will summarise the main issues raised in this short text, and (if there is time) show some of the material I am connecting it to (an excerpt from *Kung Fury* by David Sandberg, 2015).

In her anthology chapter "Media Archaeology: Where Film History, Media Art, and New Media (Can) Meet", Wanda Strauven maps the field of media archaeology as it divides into three branches, which are nevertheless connected by four common interests: the relation between history and theory; the relation between research and art; the archive; and a rethinking of temporalities (64-68). I will focus on how media archaeology reconsiders historical time, not only because Strauven gives this aspect particular consideration (dividing it into four additional sub-branches that I will discuss), but because her conceptual structuring of these various temporal perspectives points towards a key controversy within the field itself, namely: how should media archaeology approach the dynamics between historical recurrences and ruptures; novelties and clichés; differences and repetitions (to borrow Gilles Deleuze's conceptual pair).

Four times (of) media archaeology

According to Strauven, the implicit and explicit conceptions of media archaeological time, in the writings of a number of key media scholars, can roughly be divided into four concerns: “the old in the new”; “the new in the old”; “recurring *topoi*”; and “ruptures and discontinuities” (68).

Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s concept of *remediation* is primarily concerned with how older media forms return in so called new media, and as such seem to exemplify the archaeological project of identifying “the old in the new”. For Strauven, this approach “inevitably implies a historical linearity, resulting in an equally inevitable media convergence” (69), and it is contrasted with Siegfried Zielinski’s digging for singularities in the non-linear “deep time” of media history, framed by Strauven as a search for “the new in the old” (70-71).

Strauven goes on to account for Erkki Huhtamo’s study of *topoi*: media clichés readily exploited for ideological and commercial purposes (71-72). Huhtamo is, in turn, contrasted with Thomas Elsaesser, whose scepticism towards cyclical understandings of history are inspired by the explicitly *Foucauldian* archaeological aspiration to study the ruptures, epistemic breaks and discontinuities of media history in general and film history in particular (72-73).

A dynamic of difference and repetition

There is an unmistakable dynamic in Strauven’s mapping: an oscillation between historical time understood as being founded on difference (Zielinski; Elsaesser) and repetition

(Bolter and Grusin; Huhtamo). Where Zielinski celebrates singularity and Elsaesser affirms rupture, Huhtamo scrutinises cyclical clichés. Strauven's reading of *remediation* might nevertheless require some revision. In her pitting of "the old in the new" against "the new in the old", Strauven seems to equate the study of each phenomena with their celebration. While celebration is certainly at the core of Zielinski's empirical choices, the same can hardly be said about Bolter and Grusin, who, on the contrary, engage precisely in a *critical* inquiry of so called "new media". If media archaeology, as Jussi Parikka significantly points out, is as much about temporalising theory (23) as it is about theorising historical objects, then the various media archaeolog*ies* must themselves be understood in their historical specificity. It is, then, of no little importance that the concept of *remediation* was conceived of as an answer to the discourses hailing the revolutionary newness of digital media around the turn of the millennium. This, in turn, is why digital media are the main focus. Strauven writes that the concept of *remediation* inevitably implies historical linearity, which, in turn, inevitably leads to media convergence. But for Bolter and Grusin it is less a matter of postulating digital convergence as the final point of media history, as it is of looking at how digital media at a particular moment in time falsify the mythology inherent in their own designation as "new". On the other hand, it is also true that Bolter and Grusin consider *remediation* to be the inherent logic of all media relations. Whether this makes it a transcendental, a-historical concept is another question.

In any case, I find it difficult to understand how such an explicit critique of the notion of newness can be read as a celebration of the same, which is what Strauven seems to do when she draws a direct line between the study of *remediation* à the postulate of historical linearity à the affirmation of

media convergence à and the "'celebration of the continual march of progress in the name of humankind'" (Zielinski quoted in Strauven 69).

Archaeological time in the (inter)face of contemporary retro culture

With dynamic of difference and repetition in mind, I would like to propose the following questions for our discussion: what are the promises and pitfalls of engaging in the study of historical recurrences? Does the study of *remediation*, *topoi*, and so on, automatically signify an affirmation (or even celebration) of historical linearity, media convergence, and teleological progress, as Zielinski suggests? And conversely: what are the promises and pitfalls of celebrating "the new in the old" or of framing media history as a non-cyclical series of ruptures, in order to affirm "the astonishing otherness of the past" (Elsaesser quoted in Strauven 73)?

It could perhaps be argued that Zielinski's celebration of "the new in the old" maintains the novelty fetishism of the new itself in a typically modernist manner, even if he radically relocates modernity into the distant past.[1] The substitution of otherness for newness is thus worth considering in particular. By affirming "the astonishing otherness of the past", Elsaesser circumvents the potentially anti- or postmodernist critique that could be aimed at Zielinski. On the other hand, this might have its own risky implications: the construction *of* a past *as* radically other *for the sake of* astonishment; a historical exotism – an archaeological *P.T. Barnumism*.[2]

To focus (albeit not without complicating) matters, we could consider these questions from the point of view of the cultural phenomenon that Simon Reynold's calls "retromania"; or that I prefer to call "retrospectacle" (with the specifically visual manifestations of retro culture in view). How are we to study a film like *Kung Fury* (David Sandberg, 2015) without affirming recurrence, and, subsequently, a certain continuity inherent in historical relations? It is a concentrated pastiche of every '80s action film and video game combined. I have called it a *tour de force* of referential ingenuity; an oxymoron meant to frame how its almost overwhelming inventiveness is entirely fixated on referencing the media history of the recent past. A cultural pessimist might say that it is the culmination of creativity's collapse into the culture industry's "constant reproduction of the same thing" (Adorno and Horkheimer) – which is not to belittle its mastery of retro-referentiality. Strauven's temporal map does, however, make me wonder how a *Zielinskian* search for "the new in the old" or an *Elsaesseresque* affirmation of "the astonishing otherness of the past" might inform something like the time machine in *Kung Fury*: an imaginary media hybrid of old Microbee computers, '80s arcade game graphics, and the infamous Nintendo Power Glove: an over-hyped game controller that failed miserably at its 1989 release, but that enjoys a kind of ironic after-life in the retro-gaming imaginary.

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[1] At the 2014 edition of FilmForum in Udine (2-4 April), Zielinski’s discussion regarding automata in the golden age of Arab-Islamic knowledge culture culminated with a claim along the lines (I am paraphrasing from memory) that “everything we call modernity, they were already doing in the 9th century.” In an article based on this paper, he does not mention “modernity” but notes that the discussed hardware is virtually identical to the one used 500 years later in the European glockenspiel of the Middle Ages, the mechanical organs of the Renaissance, and the automata of the Age of Enlightenment (27). In other words: Zielinski’s search for “the new in the old” seems to tend towards an affirmation of origins which might in itself be contradictory to a non-linear view (reversed teleology?).

[2] This is, not least, a risk in the archaeology of imaginary media, largely my own interest – and one that is admittedly fuelled by a certain *gusto* for the weirdness of the media imaginaries of yesteryear. Perhaps Timothy Druckrey has something like this in mind when he warns that “’the mere rediscovery of the ‘forgotten,’ the establishment of oddball paleontologies, of impractical genealogies, uncertain lineages, the ‘excavation’ of antique technologies or images,

the account of erratic technical developments, are, in themselves, insufficient to the building of a coherent discursive methodology” (quoted in Kluitenberg 51).