Notes from the Media Archaeology Summer Class: working with Action Max and Pong Sports IV

These notes are the first attempt to report in a more systematic way the presentation given in class on Saturday.

If media archaeology can be defined as a militant approach to the study of media in its privileging non-canonical history, by taking this class, I have been primarily interested in the meanings that a practical, hands-on, approach on media objects add to the traditional framework of a graduate seminar. In particular, the afternoon sections of this class have allowed me to explore the possible advantages and limitations of the theories around media archaeology discussed through the readings in the mornings. The encounter in the Residual Media Depot with two machines from the past, the *Action Max* and the *Pong Sports IV*, raised questions about users' relation to these technologies and the opposite imaginaries that different gaming experiences can foreground. Beyond the reflections on these two specific machines, the experience of working at the Residual Media Depot has been significant to me especially from a methodological point of view. This is why, in this post, I will firstly focus on the methodological aspects of doing practical media archaeology within a precise "institutional" space. In the second part, I will express some ongoing considerations that I am developing after working with the *Action Max* and the *Pong Sports IV*.

Reflections After the Experience of Doing Research in the Residual Media Depot

One of the major accusation usually addressed to media archaeology is the feeling that there is “no discernible methodology” (Elsaesser 182), since the field sees itself as “subversive and resistant” through a method that is “deconstructive and non-normative” (*idem*). While this lack of an established method can be asserted on the theoretical level, in terms of flexibility in defining the emergent discipline’s boundaries, doing practical research in a media “lab” demands a particular attention to concrete methodologies of working with material technological objects.

The possibility to lead research through concrete “objects” in the Residual Media Depot has been a starting point to think about the relations among space, bodies, and the machines. In particular, I could reflect on three main concerns working in the Depot and having to deal with the Action Max and the Pong Sports IV:

- By manipulating the technologies, I noticed the particular way in which the Depot, within the University, was influencing my performativity. This underlines the importance of having such institutional infrastructures as spaces where an academic media archaeological research can be carried on as opposite to hobbyist practices of “playing” with vintage technology.
- Accordingly, the space of the Residual Media Depot offers the possibility to produce humanistic knowledge through the manipulation of tools. Experimenting with the materiality of media, thinking through component parts, through protocols, and cultural techniques has an epistemological value since it points to the material conditions that are embedded within the use of media.
- Moreover, working in the Depot within the context of the Media Archaeology Summer Class, has required and emphasized a collaborative method, changing the traditional solitary research practice in the humanities.

In this sense, the Residual Media Depot, precisely thanks to the possibility that it offers to conduct “humanistic inquiry through material and spatial construction” (Earhart 395), helps to construct media archaeology as a concrete method in media studies.

The Concepts of “Imaginary Media” and “Failure” as something to Define the ActionMax

I have started working with the Action Max since this game console conceived to work with a VCR intrigued me. The video recorder is usually considered and studied as an important technology that had a considerable impact in changing the way audiences were used to watch television. Indeed, the “time-shift”, that is the possibility of recording broadcast television in order to review the programs at different times, is usually presented as an empowering tool in the hands of tv spectators, emphasizing their control and choice. The practice around the technology of home video has been given as an example of the audience’s agency and its ability to “resist” the limiting paradigms of broadcasting TV (Gauntlett and Hill). Thus, my initial question around the *Action Max* related to the possibility it offered to imagine another use of the VCR.

The *Action Max* is a console that includes a Light Gun and headphones, using VHS tapes for games. The aim of the game is making high score hitting at the targets; the score is counted on the console. The possibility I had to play with the *Action Max* was helpful to understand the failure of this console, which totally disappointed the expectations created by the TV commercial and the instructions manual. The commercial (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bsww4SlxUbM), through the final slogan: “If it was more real, it wouldn’t be a game”, promises an immersive, interactive, and “realistic” game experience that exploits the indexicality of the images

recorded on the tape, differentiating itself from the computer games' graphics and visuals. Moreover, we can read in the instructions manual: "The headphones make the game experience more intense and more fun". Beside this attempt to provide an immersive experience to the user, the necessity of a video recorder seems to emphasize two aspects: On the one hand, it points to the centrality of the watching experience (indeed, at first, the commercial seems to be a movie trailer; then, we find out that the images come from a TV). On the other, the video recorder points to the possibility of expanding the spectator's agency already implied in the rhetoric surrounding the VCR as a "liberating" technology. In this sense, I think that the Action Max is an "imaginary media" as it pointed to other uses of the existing technology of the VCR.

In the third chapter of *What is Media Archaeology?*, Parikka, reporting Kluitenberg's conception of "imaginary media", writes: "[…]the notion becomes a way to look at how technological assemblages are embedded in hopes, desires and imaginaries of mediation" (46).

Indeed, the technology of the *Action* Max can be thought as an attempt to push the boundaries of the antynomy passive/active that usually defines users' relationship to media. Its *apparatus* seems to point to the desire of freeing the spectators from a detached contemplation of the images on the TV screen in order to make them, at last, part of the spectacle. In this sense, the *Action Max* can be inserted in the strand of "interactive cinema", meaning by this term a form that attempts to the spectators' interactive involvement in the experience of watching movies. Since Lunenfeld has defined "interactive cinema" as a "myth", "a much-hyped hybrid that never quite did it", that "has never dampened the enthusiasm of its proponents" (378), thinking of the *Action Max* in terms of "imaginary media" enables to highlight the utopian potentiality of this technology as well as its "failure".

In my experience with the *Action Max*, thinking through Sayers' definition of failure was very useful:

> *A technology failed because it didn't gain traction on the market, or there wasn't sufficient demand. By this measure, failed technologies don't have significant social or cultural "impact." But that doesn't mean they fail to spark the interests of historians and theorists. […] In fact, remaking failed technologies [in this case, making the original action Max work] can tell us a lot about the social expectations and economic investments of a given period. It also points us to how history could have unfolded differently, along alternate lines, without privileging progress or profit as our measure.*

The Action Max is a failure not only because it was a total commercial flop, but also because the action that it promises is too simple, unsophisticated for an audience already used to arcade and home computer games: shooting at the TV screen with the light gun does not affect what is being displayed, thus, making impossible any actual interaction.

In comparing the *Action Max*'s failure to the *Pong Sports IV*'s success, I was, at first, interested in how the two technologies imagined different relations of the users to the video games within the house. *Pong*, since the first home console in 1975, was conceived to allow several players to play with it. In particular, the commercial of *Pong Sports IV* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueZd_kTFdPs) emphasizes the potential of the console as a family aggregator. On the other hand, *Action Max* only allows for a very solitary gaming experience.

Thinking through the different experiences provided by the two machines, I have started considering also how the two games are supported by divergent gaming logics. In this sense, it is important to remember that *Pong* was initially targeted to sports fan: it promised to reproduce within the house, in

front of the TV, the experience of sport's competition, which entails the opposition of victory/defeat between the gamers. On the contrary, we can read on the *Action's Max* instruction manual: "The Action Max game system provides a constant challenge. So with each play, you can improve your performance – but *you're never a loser*" (my emphasis). Thus, the *ActionMax* seems to point at an alternative logic of the videogame experience: one that refuses the winner/loser's dichotomy, opening to an "imagined" alternative of video games' structure.

In this post, I do not provide any definitive claim, but working in the Residual Media Depot comparing different game consoles has been a starting point and an exercise to think through material technology in order to acknowledge the cultural expectations surrounding the use of media.

WORKS CITED

Earhart, Amy E. "The Digital Humanities As a Laboratory." *Between Humanities and the Digital.* Ed. Patrick Svensson and David Theo Goldberg. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015. 391-400.

Elsaesser, Thomas. "Media Archaeology as Symptom." *New Review of Film & Television Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 181-215, doi:10.1080/17400309.2016.1146858.

Gauntlett, David, and Annette Hill. *TV Living :Television, Culture, and Everyday Life*. London; New York: Routledge. 1999.

Parikka, Jussi. *What is Media Archaeology?*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012.

Sayers, Jentery." "The Relevance of Remaking". http://maker.uvic.ca/bclib15/