Thinking Materialist Media Archaeology through the E-book Reader

Introduction

The strand of media archaeology that looks at the concrete technology supporting the complex media infrastructure and identifies a meaningful agency to nonhuman elements is particularly influenced by the work of F. Kittler. In the 4th chapter of *What is Media Archaeology?*, Parikka examines Kittler's major theorizations to establish a link between what is usually referred to as German Media Theory and the most recent threads in media studies. In this probe, I will highlight how a media archaeology that gives primary importance to the engineering of media machines is particularly relevant in the deconstruction of the rhetorical discourse on the immateriality of digital culture. Moreover, I will highlight the major problematic nodes that emerge from Parikka's critique and which raise questions concerning the impasse and the risks that a media archaeology too focused on nonhuman agency seems to bring out. Ultimately, I intend to *materially* connect all the main issues brought up by these reflections to an object, the e-book reader; which I find very helpful in thinking about the dialectic of immateriality/materiality that the digitalization of media stimulates.

Kittler's Materialism: Advantage and Disadvantage of a "Hardware Media Archaeology"

As Parikka contends, Kittler's media theory has nurtured a media archaeology that emphasizes the *matter* of media

technologies. In this case, *matter* means to consider media in their physicality, in their engineering, and in the specific case of digital media, in their mathematical functioning. The metaphor for this method is the one of the "descent" (Parikka 81): "media archaeology goes back inside the machine" (idem). Media can be studied archaeologically not only in historical terms, but as artifacts, whose inaction does not limit itself to the interfaces with humans, but is to be deeply found in technologies' elemental matters (86). Through such an approach, which emphasizes a posthuman agency, media do not need to be interpreted as texts (78), but should be studied as hardware. If, for a moment, we put aside the risks towards an anti-humanist materialism that this perspective may encourage, we should be able to recognize a political meaning in putting forward media concrete technology: "things matter in terms of their politics and how they participate in the constitution of our world" (65). Indeed, an understanding of the materiality of media counteracts the discourse of immateriality and invisibility of the infrastructures on which media technologies are based. The feature of "lightness" attributed to digital media technologies, (supported by the smallness of the devices and by their wirelessness) and the focus on "software," mask the way in which the hardware itself is, indeed, responsible for the creation of subjects as consumers: "In application culture, we do not program anymore, but are programmed, as mere users/consumers of media" (81).

On the contrary, it seems difficult to totally embrace a media archaeology merely stemming from Kittler's materialist perspective. Indeed, the importance attributed to the engineering of the machines allows for a criticism devoid of a 'textual analysis of media culture' and leads to the acknowledgment of a posthuman agency that seems to result in a technological determinism. Notwithstanding, Parikka suggests that Kittler provides a way to defend himself from the

accusations of determinism through the concept of ‘discourse network’ (69), which eventually leads to a consideration of ‘the materiality of the body as part of media networks that extend to work […], military […] and, […] to how we are trained to use and interact with media devices.’ (76). Instead, can we try to overcome Kittler’s technological determinism, through the ANT (actant-network theory) (Latour), which, while attributing agency to non-human actants, treats equally both human and nonhuman actors at the same time: (‘We are never faced with objects or social relations, we are faced with chains which are associations of human (H) and non-humans (NH).’) (Latour 110)? Does the ANT enable us to understand the technical characteristics of media in their complex network of relationships with other people and media? However, Kittler’s “discourse network” revives the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics (Foucault), applying it to the complex network of media technologies. Indeed, the “standards” that regulate the infrastructures of communication systems, are shown, in a poststructuralist move, as responsible for the formation of subjects (Parikka 79).

This power attributed to media in their continuous act of titillating and shaping human bodies, on the one hand, can be interpreted as a continuation of a Benjaminian spatial conception of *Medium*, that the modern city inserts the subject in a continuous state of “choc” (Somaini). On the other hand, as Parikka proposes (73), German Media Theory updates that power in the contemporary, “postmodern” landscape, providing a materialist basis for a specific analysis of the subject in the contemporary regime of cognitive capitalism. The rhetoric of cognitive capitalism is based on the emphasis put on immaterial qualities such as creativity, intelligence, education, socialization, and communication as economic values. In this context, Marxist theorist Bifo Berardi (187) resituates Foucault’s notion of biopolitics in the era of

neoliberalism and digitalization. According to Bifo, digital technology as biopolitics has accelerated “the mutational processes” of “emotional system[s], desiring regimes, modalities of attention and memorization” (198). Digitalization creates this shift: If in the Fordist regime, the “interaction body/machine” was evident; with digital technologies, the technical processes occur on the level of nanotechnology. Thus, the automatisms of human/technology are kept hidden (Bifo 198-200). In this sense, I would argue, a media archaeology that digs into the machine to bring out the material technology of digital media can assume a political meaning in counteracting the automatism provoked by the invisibility of digitalization.

Conclusion

The major issues that I have raised in this probe are: the importance of studying the matter of media technologies, the problem of technological determinism, and the concept of media as part of a biopolitics that shape our sensations.

I think e-book readers are a technology apt to stimulate a discussion on the strictly materialist approach of media archaeology. Indeed, e-book readers can be analyzed on different levels: A superficial level would focus on the interfaces of this object to emphasize the “remediation” of traditional old media, the paper book. On the other hand, a precise Kittlerian perspective would dig inside the “e-ink” technology that enables the existence of the e-book reader to evaluate the technology’s agency. However, such an approach would seem arid, since the digitalization of literary works and the possibility to store them on/in a unique portable device seem to seriously modify the social function of the book. Finally, the digitalization of literature has a stimulated a determinist technological panic regarding the disappearance of paper books.

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