

Reflection: Playful Encounters in the Depot

Before I came to media studies or media archaeology, I trained as a theater artist. The word “train” weighs heavily in that sentence. Over our week-long course, we talked a fair amount about “training”: how disciplination emerges from the various ways that scholars are trained into practices, and how we code those various ways with residues of geography, culture, language, and tactics. Training is theoretical, contextual—the intellectual environments in which we thrive and that we find tactically familiar. Training is also practical, on the level of tools and skills (by which I include theorists as much as soldering irons). And, as good ol’ Foucault reminds us, training individuates us: “it separates, analyses, differentiates, carries its procedures of decomposition to the point of necessary and sufficient single units” (170). And yet in the context of the academy, there seems to be something softer, or at least more malleable, about the idea of training. Training, unlike the degree, is unfinished or possibly portable: it leaps contexts and might find useful purchase in new environments. I think of media archaeology or its uneasy doppelgänger the digital humanities (an expression of similar energies trained through different contexts) more usefully as trainings than disciplines—with blurry boundaries that can be frustrating (and expensive) to articulate in institutional contexts precisely because they reveal themselves in *practice* in more immediate (though certainly not unique, perhaps more *defamiliarized*) ways than the capitalized monoliths of English, History, or Communications. Hence the focus on the lab as a space for training and practice, for trying and testing, breaking and building. And indeed, the lab space itself trains us: we come to understand any configuration of a space as an argument in and of itself, from a lab to a library to an archive.

But to come back to my first sentence, what I mean to point to by bringing up my past training, my specific experiences as a theater artist, is to think through the intersections of training and *play* for media archaeological work. These reflections are highly preliminary. I'm deeply aware of my own gaps in thinking through play rigorously—which is to say that this is not a post about Geertz or Derrida or Huizinga. The kinds of “play” that I'm thinking of are less in the context of games (although certain producing art can be all about playing secret games with oneself, from brief improvisation to more highly structured conceptual games à la something like *Oblique Strategies*) and more in the theatrical idea of the encounter, of interesting drama emerging from the structured and scripted and yet also immediate and surprising encounter with some Other, whether it be another actor, a technical element, or a dramatic context. And it's this idea of the surprising encounter that I think was most valuable for me in my work over the course. As I've written elsewhere on this blog, I initially entered this course with a plan to explore a particular object, a SNES hack that, for me, suggested interesting territories around ideas of recycling, remix, and reuse in media archaeological praxis. But once in the Residual Media Depot, I found myself entranced by a different object—the Spectravideo Compumate—with which I was then able to begin to build new approaches and ideas for returning back to the SNES hack in later work.

Now, I don't mean to suggest that such playful encounters cannot occur in other academic and artistic contexts. Indeed, I would like to think that all the best scholarship emerges out of such encounters. But what seems to separate the media archaeological lab space from something like the traditional archive is its shifting relationship to what kinds of work one can do *with and on* the object of inquiry. In a space like the Depot, explicitly positioned as a “research collection” first and foremost, even the act of selecting an object is playful—roaming over boxes and shelves, rooting through

connecting cables, powering objects on and off in the sheer hope that the thing *works in the first place*. These indeterminacies, these chances for playful encounters, would be a little less tolerable to the traditional archive. But media archaeology takes them as first principles, whether through theorizing the idea of encountering the machine in all its nonhumanness (à la Ernst) or in the mechanical skills (training) required to open up and make sense of the machine and its technical histories. Indeed, this feels to me the central concept I take from media archaeology into my own practice: the need to encounter the object (indeed, any object, although the playful approach does feel particularly suited to the technical object) on its own terms.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1997.