

Thomas Elsaesser

Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema

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Thomas Elsaesser's *Film History as Media Archaeology* is a tour de force of monumental theoretical, historical, and bibliographic insights. The volume collects more than a dozen essays published between 1998 and 2016 and makes frequent references to works he authored even before the late 1990s, that is even before Media Archaeology (MA) became a familiar expression. At the same time, Elsaesser never refrains from acknowledging his debts to the work of others — from past master thinkers and notable peers to many of his students and collaborators — while continuously engaging with their work, in both celebratory and critical ways. Because of the volume's modular architecture, readers should not expect it to be as systematic as a *Tractatus*. Still, while this reader believes that the author did not expect such an outcome, the final result is more than the sum of its parts.

Divided into seven parts, the volume's essays are indebted to the history of Elsaesser's many activities. These include teaching courses on media archaeology at the University of Amsterdam as well as designing graduate degrees; direction of a research initiative, the Amsterdam media archaeology project (1993-2011), which in 2005 culminated in his co-direction of the *Imagined Futures (iFut)* PhD Programme; and editorial direction of the Amsterdam University Press series 'Film Culture in Transition,' of which this is the 50th volume. From the homages to his colleagues in the Netherlands, Europe, and the U.S., the reader becomes aware of the wealth of debts and decade-long collaborations that the author not only acknowledges, but also reveals as the fabric of his own writing *and* re-writing process.

The extensive introduction (pp. 17–68) traces the author's personal and scholarly trajectory, from his first use of the term 'archaeology,' in mid-1980s debates on early cinema, to a retrospective consideration of the development of film studies in reaction to the historical and theoretical disruptions associated with the digital turn. From the beginning, three working frameworks appear to have sustained the author's work: the Foucauldian conceptual vacillations between archeology and genealogy; the Benjaminian-informed *Vexata Quaestio* of the modernity thesis in all its rich articulations; and, albeit in a more engaging and critical mode, Friedrich Kittler's notion of technology as form-schemata

of human knowledge. By variously engaging with these frameworks, Elsaesser approaches critically the scholarly views that regard the digital universe as a normative status in need of a multilayered excavation. Instead, he reveals how his own approach is more ‘film history conducted as media archaeology’ rather than a ‘media archaeology that is firmly dedicated to tracking the *arche* of the digital’ (p. 369).

While adopting Wanda Strauven’s map of MA’s four key practices, with their emphases on 1. the old in the new (David Bolter and Richard Grusin); 2. the new in the old (Siegfried Zielinski); 3. recurring *topoi* (Erkki Huhtamo); and 4. ruptures and discontinuities (Elsaesser), the author further clarifies this notion. In his writings, MA constitutes an expanded epistemology of film historiography; an expanded epistemology of archival policy, preservation, and museal exhibition; and an expanded epistemology of digital revolution and transmedia/participatory engagement. Compared to Manovich’s *The Language of New Media* (2001), which Elsaesser celebrates for its intermedial in-betweenness, *Film History as Media Archaeology* approaches ‘digital media practice by having cinema firmly in mind — its apparatuses, its affordances, its supposedly defining characteristics.’ (pp. 36-37). Early and pre-cinema, on the one hand, and digital media on the other are kept in a parallax perspective. This position enables the author to look at cinema beyond specific cinematic techniques, more philosophically that is, as a ‘thought experiment’ (p. 37) along three main lines: epistemological, ontological, and aesthetic.

At the center of Elsaesser’s notion of MA is the dialogue between the rich historiography of early and pre-cinema and the pressing conceptual and historical solicitations of the digital turn. This nodal point inspired the *Imagined Futures* research programme, which identified two key periods of transformation for a broad spectrum of media technologies: 1870-1900 and 1970-2000. With this bifocal optics in mind, the key question is not just ‘what cinema is,’ but more productively ‘where cinema has been, is, and will be,’ even in its ubiquitous invisibility. Thus, Elsaesser’s notion of archaeology does not primarily result in a retroactive recovery legislated by mono-causality, but it privileges a metahistorical heterogeneity and interconnection of causes that allow old and new media to interpenetrate one another — in the mode more of alliances and family resemblances than in those of evolution, heritage or family trees. The ultimate terrain is what he calls the *Medienverbund*, or ‘tactical alliance of media practices,’ which is something utterly different from the notion of “transfer” or “translation” of the properties of one medium into another.’ (p. 112).

From the very beginning, we observe the author’s parallax approach which, in order to connect past and present with future, allegorizes early cinema, new media, and cinema’s contemporary museal destinies. In one of his most celebrated essays, ‘Film History as Media Archaeology’ (first published in 2005), Elsaesser explores the multidimensional consequences of positing the digital not as moment of rupture along an alleged continuity, but as *metaphor*, and specifically as ‘a metaphor for the discursive space and enunciative position of rupture

itself' (p. 73). To put it in other words, the rupture of new media is not to be understood primarily in technological terms, but as a 'reflexive turn in thinking about cinema' (p. 371). In thinking about the conditions for such a rupture, Elsaesser identifies in early cinema the key prolepsis to the new media paradigms, the crucial site where discussions about change, continuity, and disruption have taken place more vigorously than in most areas of film historiography. Early cinema's alternative, non-hegemonic, and quickly obsolescent forms of visual engagement — together with the critical language they inspired (i.e., 'cinema of attractions') — resonate with both avant-garde experimentations and their new media reactivations. Passed the trap of old and new teleologies, the profitable historiographical trajectory of New Film History can help to discourage all forms of telos, whether related to realism, instant communication or virtual reality, as long as new genealogical ways of thinking do not insist on continuity, whether 'implied or assumed' or on 'unfulfilled promises and incomplete precursors' (p. 93).

The author adopts an archaeological perspective and performs a productive recasting of such *loci classici* of film discourse as 'cinematic *dispositif*' (Part I), Sound (Part II), Interactivity (Part III), 'Digital Cinema' (Part III), '3D,' 'Energy', and 'Entropy' ('New Genealogies of Cinema,' Part V), arriving at the conclusion that MA is both a symptom of obsolescence, a digital ideology, and a form of cure or crisis management, 'deconstructing and reconstructing the human *after* the digital and *through* the technological' (p. 386).

An archaeological approach to cinema cannot be reduced to discussions of its default discourse (i.e., cinematic apparatus, photographic ontology, monocular perspective), but it should also take into consideration those practices that cinematography itself made obsolete, including phantasmagorias, panoramas, dioramas, and other installations. Once we disengage cinema from its conventional association with photography and the movie theater, once we move away from chronological trajectories, then we can recognize cinema's inscription in a longer and broader history of images' mobility, portability, commodification. Further, once we move away from the prescribed notion of representation, other considerations emerge, including those of energy, intensity, and emanation. The necessity to overcome the notion of cinema as an iconic and storytelling medium should open it up to its appreciation as a '*mediator* that prepares and reshapes the physical world as image' (p. 375). The conclusion (of the introduction) is also the conclusion of the volume. 'Film history as media archaeology is, among other things, dedicated to [cinema's] invention' (p. 68), a task that had only just begun and for which this reader finds *Film History as Media Archaeology* to be its indispensable Baedeker.

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