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The Historian and the Antiquarian: Erkki Huhtamo's Media Archaeology

Review of Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles*, MIT Press (Leonardo Book Series), 2013, 456 pp.

by Simone Natale, Humboldt University Berlin

Just a decade ago, many within media and film studies wondered what “media archaeology” actually meant. Even German media theorist Friedrich Kittler confessed that it had taken him a long time to understand the meaning of the term (Armitage 2006, p. 32) – and this despite the fact that his own legacy had been of key importance for the emergence of this field. Recently, also thanks to the publications of works providing a more comprehensive overview of the field (Parikka 2012; Huhtamo and Parikka 2011), media archaeology has ceased to be such a vaporous concept, to which different authors tended to attribute quite different definitions. It now depicts a more clearly defined area, with a stronger and broader impact in the cognate disciplines of film and media history. The publication of Erkki Huhtamo's *Illusions in Motion* is a further step in this direction. It is to be seen not only as a case study that extends and complements existing scholarship on the panorama (Oettermann 1997), but also as a systematic attempt to clarify and put into use media archeology as a set of conceptual and methodological tools.

Huhtamo has spent some three decades of his life collecting and studying texts, images, and objects related to the moving panorama and other optical spectacles. The result is a monumental book providing an exceedingly accurate insight into the role of moving panoramas and related spectacles in nineteenth-century visual and media culture. Illustrated by around 120 images, many of which from the author's private collection, *Illusions in Motion* will appeal to scholars in film and media studies, visual culture, as well as literature, nineteenth century studies, and cultural history. Its elegant design and iconographic richness makes the book an object as attractive as the visual gadgets described in its pages – although the minuteness of the font will be a challenge to the eyes of many readers.

The moving panorama (fig. 1) were long paintings moved by mechanical systems and exhibited in environments as diverse as community halls, local opera houses, theaters, and churches. In contrast to the huge circular panoramas of the big metropolis of Europe and America, which were presented in buildings appositely built, moving panoramas were brought to different locations by itinerant lecturers and showmen. Such mobility justifies the transnational approach chosen by Huhtamo, who provides information on panoramas and related spectacles in different linguistic and national contexts across Europe and Northern America. Just like performers in the show business moved along circuits that were increasingly transnational and transatlantic, in fact, moving panoramas and other visual attractions circulated in different cultural contexts throughout the nineteenth century. The book takes a roughly chronological approach, starting by addressing visual spectacles that anticipated the panorama, mainly in the eighteenth century, and subsequently examining the development of numerous forms of moving panoramas, dioramas, and related visual media throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It also sheds light on the different performative configurations that characterized these

spectacles, as well as the metaphoric and literary uses that Huhtamo describes as the “discursive panoramas.”¹

Taking up an integrated approach to the history of different media technologies and practices, *Illusions in Motion* provides an in-depth exploration into certain tenets of nineteenth century visual culture that have been a fertile topic of interest for scholars in film studies. Yet, in contrast to the emphasis on immersive viewing and illusion as the primary visual strategies employed in nineteenth century that has characterized much scholarship in the area (Nead 2007; Friedberg 1994; Schivelbusch 1986; Crary 1990), Huhtamo describes the moving panorama as primarily a storytelling device, stressing the role played by the performances of speakers and lecturers accompanying its exhibitions. Furthermore, inserting the moving panorama in a burgeoning media culture – defined as “a cultural condition where large number of people live under the constant influence of media” (p. 364) –, he notes elements of similarity not only with cinema, but with a broader range of media technologies and practices of the twentieth and first-twentieth century. Particular emphasis, in this regard, is given to the moving panorama as a mobile medium, to its reliance on a modality of spectatorship that encouraged audiences to move around and adjust their point of view within controlled environments.

A main contribution of this book is that it provides a convincing demonstration of how the approach labelled “media archaeology” – of which Huhtamo is one of the most relevant figures – can be fruitfully applied to historical inquiry in film and media studies. Indeed, the book succeeds to overcome some of the limits that have often characterized other attempts to

¹ With “performative configurations” I indicate the specific situations and modalities by which panoramas were offered to the public. Huhtamo employs a distinction made by Jeffrey Ruggles between the painted and performed panorama: “the former was the product of the painter, a roll of pictures. It turned into a performed panorama when it was unrolled in front of the spectators, who also listened to the lectures, observed his gestures, enjoyed the music, and admired the special effects” (p. 15).

define this field and to describe its methods and goals. In particular, one of the main problem of scholarship in media archaeology has been a tendency towards methodological anarchy (see Natale 2012a). This is at least in part due to media archaeology's programmatic refusal to posit a hierarchy among different sources and phenomena: technologies and practices that were never realized or promptly dismissed should in fact be considered, media archaeologists point out, as important as any other (Kluitenberg 2006). Huhtamo himself adopted a similar perspective in several of his previous works, as he pointed out that "any source - be it a detail of a picture or a part of a machine - can be useful if we approach it from a relevant perspective" (Huhtamo 1997, p. 221), or as he provocatively argued that religious visions or the narratives of madmen are pieces of evidences just as relevant to historical analysis as patents and institutional sources (Huhtamo and Parikka 2011, p. 25). While such openness has allowed media archaeologists to shed light on aspects of media culture that were previously neglected, it sometimes undermined their capacity to address issues of relevance, hierarchy, and pertinence, which are crucial to historical inquiry. Yet, Huhtamo's exploration into the archaeology of the moving panorama demonstrates that a media archaeological approach is perfectly compatible with methodological accuracy. The Finnish-born scholar combines the reference to different kinds of sources and cultural realms with a rigorous exercise of corroborative methods, by which the pertinence and relevance of all information are carefully discussed and evaluated. While opening his gaze to issues and voices that are often left at the margins of history, Huhtamo nonetheless refuses to wander in the anarchic and occasionally inconclusive pattern that has characterized some scholarship in media archaeology.

Media archaeology has been resistant to clear-cut definitions as a single field or approach. In fact, different scholars in this area have proposed rather different visions of its

methods and scope (see Goddard 2014; Huhtamo and Parikka 2011; Ernst 2013). Huhtamo's book, in this regard, has the merit to adopt a rather comprehensive and clear approach, which can be summarized in four main theoretical and methodological concerns: the insistence on material culture and on an antiquarian's approach to media history; the use of historical approaches in order to provide insights useful to the understanding of "new" media; the refusal of teleological perspectives based on the idea of technological progress; and the centrality of the relationship between media and the imagination. Addressing each of these issues in more detail helps to illustrate Huhtamo's media archaeology and to discuss how it interacts with literature in film studies.

The first key element of Huhtamo's media archaeology is its antiquarian vocation, by which media are studied also and especially in their materiality and technical functionality. Such vocation has been a staple of media archaeological research recuperating "dead" or obsolete media and artefacts (Hertz and Parikka 2012), or recreating technical media of the past (Krajewski 2011). The book's impressive iconographic material, which provides an insight into the personal museum of panorama-related objects that Huhtamo has collected, represents a very apt illustration of this element in media archaeological methods. The author, in fact, has carried out his research in libraries and archives as much as in antique shops, flea markets, private collections and museums. He not only collected an impressive range of textual materials regarding panoramas and other visual spectacles, but also a large array of objects and artifacts pertaining to this tradition. Such artifacts are discussed thoroughly in the text, and often presented to the reader in the form of photographs of the objects, or illustrations providing clues about their functioning and content. As an archaeologist learns about the past through the

examination of material objects and artifacts, Huhtamo believes that artifacts are a principal source of knowledge for scholars in the history of media culture and technology.

The excavation into the emergence and development of the moving panorama is thus conducted within two levels that mutually corroborate each other: the level of textual sources and the level of the material culture, whereas the latter is intended as powerful means to revive the experience of media cultures of the past. In this, film scholars will certainly notice the legacy of studies of pre-cinematic technologies that draw on private and public collections of optical instruments and spectacles (Mannoni 1995; Pesenti Campagnoni 2001). The peculiarity of Huhtamo's work is that a large majority of the objects as well as the original illustrations reproduced in the book are from his own personal collection. His identity as media archaeologist lies in the blurring boundaries between historian and antiquarian, scholar and collector. His scholarship guides the reader in a personal museum where the gaze of the media and cultural historian fuses with the skills of the antiquarian and the archaeologist *tout court*, complementing the strong emphasis on materiality of other media archaeologists, such as Wolfgang Ernst and Jussi Parikka.

The second key element of Huhtamo's media archaeology is given by the fact that he characterizes media archaeology as an excavation of the past that is instrumental to the understanding of the present, by claiming that the study of the moving panoramas provides insights relevant to the history of media that followed. Such approach is not only complementary to attempts to establish a "new media history" (Peters 2009), but resonates in film studies with approaches to the so-called pre-history of cinema or pre-cinema (Mannoni 1995; Perriault 1981). Indeed, as Huhtamo and Parikka (2011) acknowledge in the introduction to their edited volume on media archaeology, Ceram's "archaeology of cinema" (1965) counts among the main

antecedents and inspirations for media archaeology. In contrast to some literature on the pre-history of cinema, however, excavations into the archaeology of media employ programmatically a transmedia, trans-disciplinary point of view, refusing to posit a teleological history that directs towards the emergence of cinema.² The subject of Huhtamo's archaeological search goes beyond the boundaries of media specificity, to embrace the emergence of a wider media culture by which increasing numbers of people live under the continual influence of media (p. 365). In so doing, Huhtamo's media archaeology enters in dialogue with recent attempts to reframe the dialectic between "old" and "new" media within film studies (Elsaesser 2004; Gaudreault and Marion 2013).

The third element characterizing Huhtamo's media archaeology is the refusal of teleological narratives of technological progress. Crucially, such refusal involves the recognition that the existence of any given media configuration is not a proof of its necessity (Cubitt 2014, p. 8). This is arguably the one key issue on which all most influential scholars in media archaeology have agreed upon. Siegfried Zielinski, for instance, underlines that "the history of the media is not the product of a predictable and necessary advance from primitive to complex apparatus. The current state of the art does not necessarily represent the best possible state" (Zielinski 2006, p. 7). In a similar vein, Jussi Parikka observes that media archaeology engages in the search for alternative presents and pasts, moving from the consideration that "it could have been otherwise" (Parikka 2012, p. 13). Huhtamo's specific contribution to this discourse has been his proposal that media archaeology should focus on the study of *topoi*, i.e. "recurring cyclical phenomena that (re)appear and disappear and reappear over and over again in media

² Media archaeology is both transdisciplinary because it refuses rigid and media-specific distinctions between the archaeology of cinema, television, etc.; and transmedia because it looks at the connections across different media and practices.

history, somehow seeming to transcend specific historical contexts” (Huhtamo 1997, p. 222). In *Illusions in Motion*, Huhtamo argues that a recurring *topos* is particularly relevant to the visual and media history of the moving panoramas: the problem of the confusion between things that are real and things that are illusory. The relevance of this *topos* for the history of the moving image, whose founding myth of the “train effect” depicted early spectators exchanging the image of a train for reality (Loiperdinger 2004; Bottomore 1999), is evident. In this sense, Huhtamo’s work also points to the opportunity – that scholars such as Murray Leeder (2010) have started to explore – of framing the legend of the train effect within a longer media history preceding (and following: see Natale 2012b, p. 274-277) the advent of cinema.

The fourth and final element characterizing Huhtamo’s media archaeological approach is its emphasis on the relationship between media and the imagination. The question around the “media imaginary” (see Natale and Balbi 2014) is central to the work of media archaeologists such as Eric Kluitenberg (2006). Yet, contributions in this area have often been jeopardized by the lack of clear definitions and working methodologies addressing the issue of the imaginary, or by the difficulty to combine it with media archaeology’s focus on technology and materiality. Huhtamo nevertheless contends that approaches to the imaginary complement the relevance accorded by media archaeology to the role of artifacts and machines: “although hard technological facts matter,” he states, “the discourse that envelop them and mold their meanings play an even more decisive role” (p. 17). He therefore refers to the existence of a “discursive panorama,” pointing to the situations in which the panorama is used as a figure of speech or a metaphor. Metaphorical associations included description of things as different as clouds, crowds, and prophetic visions (p. 15). The discursive panorama, Huhtamo argues, is as real as the “painted” and the “performative” panoramas. More broadly, he regards the media imaginary

as something that shapes how people look at things and form their own reality frame. Inspired by the works of Kittler, Crary, and Foucault, but arguably also by the North American media studies tradition that finds its roots in the thinking of Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis, he proposes the notion of a “media-cultural imaginary,” pointing out that media culture is not only an economic and social condition, but also “a shared state of mind, internalized in different degrees by each individual living under its spell” (p. 364). Media, Huhtamo professes to believe, “have come to dominate minds to such an extent that they have replaced other reference points” (p. 366). This conceptualization of the imaginary does not take the form of a plain substitution or “simulacrum” (p. 366) of reality in Baudrillard’s sense. Instead, through the analysis of precise moments in the history of the moving panoramas, it seems to create meaning within a more complex and context-specific play of exchange between reality and mediation. For instance, Huhtamo notes that the reality effect produced by panoramas is linked to contextual factors that can be manipulated by promotional efforts. Refusing to identify in the medium alone the origin of such dynamics, Huhtamo suggests that the reality effect is ultimately a state of mind kindled by the complex interaction of situational, contextual, and imaginary factors.

Despite Huhtamo’s occasional reticence to engage fully and in detail with contemporary scholarship and to address broader theoretical issues, the book has the potential to become a reference point for scholars in media history and visual culture. The author’s attention to details, the quantity and accuracy of information provided about a wide range of visual spectacles, and its encyclopedic character will make the book a useful instrument for more than one generation of scholars interested in the visual and media history of the nineteenth century. Within the field of film studies, it stands as a compelling case for writing a “pre-history” of the cinematic medium that refuses a medium-specific approach, to move beyond the history of cinema *per se*.

Huhtamo's media archaeology, in this sense, stimulates film scholars to search for the historical and cultural meaning of visual technologies and practices within the broad spectrum of media culture. Perhaps most crucially, it suggests that one of the ways to do so is to merge the scrutiny of the historian with the obsessive quest and the skilled connoisseurship of an antiquarian.

Image captions

Fig. 1. Panorama of Niagara Falls, author unknown, after 1873. Albumen silver print, 32.4 x 129.9 cm. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program (object number: 85.XP.13.1).

Biographical note

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