The Art of Searching

On “Wild Archaeologies” from Kant to Kittler

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Abstract The article focuses on the phenomenon of “Wild Archaeologies” – that is, on “archaeologies” that have appeared in the history of knowledge outside of Classical Archaeology: The first of these projects one thinks of, is of course Foucault’s L’archéologie du savoir, but there has also been Freud’s archaeology of the soul, Benjamin’s archaeology of modernity as well as Kittler’s archaeology of media – and even Kant’s archaeology of metaphysics. All of these various projects experimented with a material reflection of temporality and presented alternatives to the conventional historical thinking of the past. What do these various projects have in common? What is their historical, philosophical and epistemological relation to contemporary archive theory as well as to Classical Archaeology? And which consequences has this “archaeological method” or thinking for art history? And finally, what does Giorgio Agamben’s recent claim mean: that “the archaeologist’s gesture is the paradigm of every human activity”?

Keywords Archaeology, History, Temporality, Epistemology, Archive theory, Foucault, Freud, Benjamin, Kittler, Agamben

Introduction

Thinking temporality in the digital age requires a different line of thinking than historical discourse: not narrating, but counting; seeing rather than reading; not historia, but archaiologia – and perhaps not even the disciplined approach of archaeology proper, but such a thing as “wild archaeology,”1 which simply means, at first, that one is dealing with archaeological projects outside of archaeology proper. And the 20th century has seen a number of such “wild” archaeological projects: Sigmund Freud’s “Archaeology of the Soul,” Walter Benjamin’s “Archaeology of Modernity” and, of course, Foucault’s “Archaeology of Knowledge,” which is probably the first of these mysterious projects that comes to mind. These classical modern projects are the most famous, but they are not the only ones. They are historically framed by Immanuel Kant’s “Archaeology of Philosophy” from 1793 and Friedrich Kittler’s “Archaeology of Media” written 200 years later.

This text on media archaeology will deal less with media theory as such than with its archaeological version: thinking media archaeologically. It thus addresses Kittler’s singular media theory as a consequence of a long tradition of archaeological thinking and focuses less on the
media part of media archaeology than on its archaeological condition, its archaeological a priori, so to speak.

But why are all of these projects named “archaeology”? Why did their authors choose this highly confusing term in the first place? Why did they transform archaeology into a metaphor (that is not a metaphor)? And do they have anything in common?

The timespan from Kant to Kittler covers two centuries of archaeological projects – 200 years in which the world not only saw the rise, peak and decline of the discipline of Winckelmann’s classical archaeology, but in which the epistemological conditions of its articulation changed radically. It may be possible to summarise the archaeological project from Kant to Kittler by saying that all of these projects (perhaps with the exception of Kant) experimented with a material reflection of temporality that began in the 18th century and reached a definite climax in the 20th century.

This diagnosis enables us to address the hypothesis of this text: In the 20th century a new, archaeological thinking of the past appeared next to its historical twin. The intellectual history of the 20th century was, in its most influential and avant-garde moments, archaeological, not historical. If we can say that the 19th century was mostly dominated by historical thinking, historical concepts and the philosophy of history, then we might as well say that 20th-century thinking (and art making, by the way) was dominated by archaeological thinking and concept making.

Archaeology and History

But are archaeology and history really opposites? Do they not go hand in hand in reconstructing one and the same past? History and visibility do not necessarily merge to create an alliance. Everything has a past, but not every past is visible. So in these archaeological projects we are dealing with a certain suspicion towards history (and perhaps towards everything written): Perhaps the past was completely different from our notion of it? Perhaps the documentation of the past in fact represents the first step to its loss? Perhaps the “monopoly of scripture”\(^2\) has run out, since its digital successor no longer reads, but calculates? This may sound like a conspiracy theory, and certainly the total alterity of the past, which has often been uncovered by archaeologists, is really disconcerting. Talking about monopolies, one should keep in mind that it is history that has always had a monopoly on the past, ever since the Enlightenment movement, and that it is, thus, history and historians that are linked to all power operations in contemporary Western
society. Therefore, archaeology, despite its seemingly greater closeness to the past, has a less exclusive claim to truth than history; everything archaeological seems to be bracketed by a magical conjunctive: This is how it might have been. This is also why archaeology seems somewhat less “dangerous” and further away from power operations than history (even though every nation that has developed archaeology as a discipline has obviously used it politically). 3 Facing this power monopoly of history, one might envision something like a rehabilitation of archaeology’s material reflection of the past.4

Indeed, a history’s text is lacking a primary visibility and materiality, which is why we have seen the development of a new reflection of temporality, a non-historical reflection of the past, in addition to, below or in the place of history. This other 20th-century reflection of the past – and of the Otherness of the past – the “opposite term to history,” as Kittler put it, was not called legend or myth. It was called archaeology. This archaeological reflection of the past accompanies historical thinking like a dark shadow, aiming to enumerate its blind spots. This effort of uncovering differs systematically from official histories, which, compared to archaeology, look like textbooks, not real debris and detritus. Perhaps the printed and official word, the textbook version of the world, is really just telling a story? And perhaps the world of things, material cultures and debris contains a completely different world?

The moment we realise the distance and difference between material and textual reflections of the past can be quite unsettling. All of a sudden, solid ground is replaced by an unstable epistemological abyss. In the words of Michel Foucault, “We do not live in the form of a rectangular piece of paper” (“On ne vit pas dans un espace neutre et blanc; on ne vit pas, on ne meurt pas, on n’aime pas dans le rectangle d’une feuille de papier”) – and neither does our past, one might add.

So we are dealing with the moment in which we realise that the material world of things, material cultures and debris holds another vision of the past than the one we normally see. This difference is more evident in the atomised world of things at eBay than in a history book, in the chaotic gaze of the flaneur than in a tourist guide, or in a material love story like Leanne Shapton’s Important Artefacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Leonore Doolan and Harold Morris, including Books, Street Fashion and Jewelry than in written love letters. In short, archaeology does not represent the past; it materialises it. Archaeologists work with the materiality of the past, whereas historians work with its written documents (which is also why one might get the impression that the
archaeologist is “closer” to the past than the historian). Working with documents excludes the labour of looking at monuments and material cultures – the objects with which archaeologists are dealing with for hundreds of years now.

Hence, the difference between archaeology and history is the difference between monument and document (to put it in the terms of Foucault), between the stone and the word, seeing and reading, visibility and textuality. Archaeology makes visible, whereas history narrates what has already been documented. It points to breaks and gaps, whereas history pursues a quick linearity of dates. Archaeology is slower than history; it calculates in spaces of time that it understands literally – as field, layer or block of time. These solid blocks initially oppose views of the past like a blackened page in an old book, telling us not to assimilate the unintelligible. Archaeology is bound to the silent ashes of the past; uncovering it is hard physical work. Whereas the intelligible history weightlessly jumps back and forth on an immaterial axis of time, material archaeology has to ignore the present to reach the dungeon of time. This is why its work always begins “in contemporary grounds,” as Walter Benjamin wrote in his Denkbild Excavating and Remembering (Ausgraben und Erinnern). In archaeology one does not count from the beginning to the end; one calculates back from the end, which is the present.

**Epistemology of Temporality**

One might argue against the notion of such an opposition between history and archaeology, saying that history and the past are inseparable: Is the past not identical to history? In case of political problems, any present consults the past, that is, history. And it really seems as if history and archaeology both act as agents of the past: Both are eager to reconstruct it. For the uninvolved observer it may look as if both disciplines are working complementarily with the image of the past. Some may even consider the archaeologist a specific kind of historian, one who works with the material remnants of the past. But even though it looks as if archaeology and history go hand in hand to reconstruct one and the same past, one should not ignore the differences between the two. “The past” in general is not identical to the specific discipline of history – historical documents are merely one prominent, dominant and powerful way of sequencing the past.

Another difference between archaeology and history is the qualitative difference of their temporalities. Giorgio Agamben, the last of the “wild archaeologists,” makes it very clear in his archaeological methodology that history and archaeology differ in their temporalities: The historian
explores the documented past, the one that has already originated – in Benjamin’s German, das *Entsprungene*, the originated.⁹ In contrast, the archaeologist, according to Agamben, searches for the *Entspringendes*, the originating, instead of the always already originated – for the gold dust of the arising, originating past, the active and effective past. He searches not for dates within an existing temporality, but for novel temporalities, for the emergence of original temporalities – which can be induced by dreams (Freud) or new readings of history (Benjamin), by knowledge (Foucault) or new media (Kittler). In every case we are dealing with the experience of an original temporality, and this experience of an original temporality, the impression that something “completely new” is beginning, can also be brought about by events like childbirth (which is true of the Christian temporality and calendar), an involuntary recollection (which is the case in Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*) or even the arrival of a new love. This arrival and institution of a new temporality has been called an “event,” a concept that contemporary philosophy, from Agamben to Nancy and from Deleuze to Badiou, is so eagerly trying to define. An event, in the words of Agamben, is “the place of an operation that has yet to obtain its effects”;¹⁰ this is obviously a very messianic, Benjaminian phrasing – the idea of an “operation” whose effects are yet to come. Normally we would expect the searcher in the past, the historian or the archaeologist, to examine the effects of a cause, both of which lie in the past. But Agamben’s archaeologist searches not for the *Entsprungene*, but for the *Entspringende*, for the originating, effective past, or, more generally, for all effective operations – that lie in the past, but effect the present.

One could argue that this archaeology is “wild,” because it is not looking for the old, but for that which is still effective today. All *wild archaeologies* are working with effective, unpast pasts, which is why many of their texts include ghosts and zombies and undead pasts, suggesting something that is unfinished, unpast and still effective. Because the wild archaeologist is working on *Entspringendes*, originating and offspringing pasts, he is in a way working even closer to the present than the historian – though not closer on the time bar. His objects are the constituting and instituting forces of today, no matter how long they are past; his past is the active past of a, say, trauma, which can be at the very same time very close and very distant: very much hidden but very effective and powerful at the same time. This is why the “wild archaeologist” is working closer to the present, because he is looking for its origin, its codification, no matter how far or close they are temporarily; he explores the access
or the institution of the present moment or, in the words of Foucault, “the grounds out of which we originated.” And this ground, one might add, is not necessarily the oldest one, especially if we are dealing with objects like media in media archaeology or so-called dead media archaeology (a term with which I disagree, because media is by definition never dead. There can be no dead media archaeology, as media is always effective and operative). This operating and offspringing aspect of the “wild archaeologies” makes it a discipline of advents and beginnings, also for Agamben: “The point of beginning, the arché of archaeology, is what can dawn when the archaeological survey has ended.” Thus, the archaeologist searches for points of beginnings; he travels back to a point before time, to a point of dawn, when time has not been constituted and a new temporality is born.

The Archaeological Époché

In other words, archaeology, for Agamben (as for Georges Bataille and Freud), is also the discipline of regression; journeys back in time, searching for beginnings and unformed, informe pasts, are also temporal regressions. Archaeology should be “capable of going back regressively to the point before the separation of consciousness and unconsciousness.” For Agamben, archaeology must go “beyond memory and beyond oblivion” to the “threshold of indistinguishability of the two” in order to find “an original approach to the present.”

It is not surprising then that Agamben identifies this moment of suspension of time before all temporal oppositions and decisions in ontological and psychoanalytical terms. And it is even less surprising when he finally arrives at their addition, the 1930 psycho-ontological book Dream and Existence by Ludwig Binswanger with its now famous introduction by Foucault. This is the very text in which Foucault, according to Agamben, has “described archaeology’s strategies and gestures with the greatest precision.”

Now we have to put the different parts of Agamben’s archaeological agenda together. Archaeology searches for the point of beginning that is coded into every dream, every existence and every history as its constituting a priori. This is why the relation between history and archaeology is identical to the relation of already originated, constituted time and originating, constituting time (archaeology always works with originating, constitutional time, Benjamin’s Entspringendes). But how can we reach this long past but yet very close age? How can we find the originating and constitutional time, as we always already operate in constituted
time? How can we remember a time when we did not know what time was? How can we regress to the other time and to the other of time (which is obviously a related question to Heidegger’s famous way back from Seiendes to Sein)? To answer these complicated questions, one might look at the methodology of every “wild archaeology” – which can itself, as we know from Benjamin, be rather wild. But let’s keep in mind that this was the very reason for which all of the “wild archaeologists” from Freud to Foucault and even from Kant to Kittler, elaborated quite fancy and extravagant methodologies: Because the regression from constituted time to constitutional time is quite difficult – if one wants to avoid, in any case, like Benjamin, the ontological operation from Seiendes to Sein.

Or, to return to the example of media archaeology, one might also try to travel from the constituted time of, say, literary knowledge back to the dawn of constituting time, when this knowledge was in the process of being constituted; he can go back to the machines, the techniques, the media that constituted knowledge in the first place. I personally believe that this regressive or ontological operation is the reason why Kittler’s media archaeology seemed so radical: because it operated in an ontological time frame; because it constantly executed ontological claims – without developing a methodology for them.

In contrast, Agamben, for the purpose of travelling from constituted time back to constitutional time, proposes “a kind of archaeological époché,” citing Husserl’s famous concept of phenomenological époché. But whereas Husserl tried to save the phenomenon from logics, Agamben’s archaeological époché saves the historical phenomenon from being buried in history. In other words, Agamben – like Kant and Benjamin before him – wants to save the transcendental or ontological quality of the historical phenomenon, which is why he describes archaeology as the “immanent a priori of historiography.” This is the job of archaeology: to save the transcendental or ontological quality of the historical phenomenon. Archaeology saves the singularity of any true event from being buried under historical time, from drowning in time. Only archaeology can do that; only archaeology “is capable of giving the historical phenomenon its intelligibility.” This is why Agamben finally, in a very solemn statement, tells us that “the gesture of the archaeologist is the paradigm of any true human activity.”

So much for Agamben’s renewed “philosophical archaeology,” which is, I think, less “wild” than the other “wild archaeologies,” because in its philosophical, transcendental gesture it loses the aggressive and avant-garde commitment of the projects from Freud to Foucault and from Benjamin
to Kittler. Agamben’s “philosophical archaeology” holds no materiality, it swallows and ignores the conflict between paper and stone, reading and seeing, text and technique, which is why one might fear that in Agamben’s transcendental manoeuvre archaeology is completely absorbed and assimilated by philosophy; it loses the radical otherness and aggressive alterity that led to the establishment of “wild archaeologies” in the first place. Therefore, one might ask: Is archaeology without materiality still archaeology? And what is materiality anyway?

**Material Epistemology**

We have said that archaeology, unlike history, does not work with objects and materials that represent the past, but with objects that materialise it – in varying ways. Despite archaeology’s obvious materiality, much depends on the varying ways of rendering its material readable and on defining this material in the first place – which is a more than difficult epistemological task, looking at the unstable grounds of Freud’s or Foucault’s “material,” which consisted of self-defined psychoanalytical or scientific discourses, which were both far from being evident. This is not only true of archaeology proper, but even more so of the sketched tradition of “wild archaeologies”: From Freud to Foucault and from Kant to Kittler we find varying ways of constructing materiality (which is a paradoxical operation in itself, because materiality ontologically is that which is not constructed, but always already there). Nevertheless, Freud establishes the human soul and psyche as “material,” three-dimensional entities, where the unconscious is buried underneath consciousness like buried cities under the Earth’s surface; Benjamin treats historical documents as the material that needs to be freed from its historical context; Foucault constructs discourses and knowledge – discursive and epistemological practices – as material entities; and Kittler takes up the empirical materiality of media and links it to the realm of knowledge. But materiality – whatever it may be – remains the one common denominator of all these archaeologies.

In every case, in every “wild archaeology,” it is this materiality that operates as other, as altérité, as the other of history and historical knowledge: The shocking sexual incidences that Freud brought to light were the other of the stories and histories of his patients; Benjamin’s railroad tracks (that served as iron carriers for the first Parisian arcades) and real estate stocks (that financed them) operated as the other of art and architectural history; and the material media that Kittler worked on unearthed an entirely different knowledge than the literary or historical knowledge it replaced. These are drastic epistemological differences –
between historical and archaeological knowledge, between visuality and textuality, between materiality and representation, which brings back the question: What is materiality in the first place?

No matter how we interpret materiality or whose interpretation we follow, we cannot deny that the archaeological projects outside of classical archaeology have reinterpreted what materiality is or could be: In Freud’s “Archaeology of the Soul,” all of a sudden immaterial objects like the human unconscious could be described as materiality; shortly after him, Benjamin in his “Archaeology of Modernity” rewrote the history of the 19th century as its prehistory, as its “primal history of the nineteenth century” (Urgeschichte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts); and with Foucault’s “Archaeology of Knowledge” intangible objects like discourses and knowledge were materialised. In short, by detour of the archaeological model (which is something completely different from a metaphor) the very idea of materiality was transformed in the 20th century: New entries on the agenda of materiality emerged, and many new objects could now be described as “material” objects. And it is no secret that all of these new interpretations of materiality, all of these projects from Freud to Foucault and from Benjamin to Kittler, have had a tremendous effect on the Humanities. After Friedrich Kittler’s famous, but untranslatable slogan “Expulsion of the spirit out of the humanities” (which in German is still named Geisteswissenschaften, which makes the slogan Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften) was transformed into Kulturwissenschaft, cultural and media studies; and one of the trade secrets of Kultur- und Medienwissenschaften was (and still is) that they are operating on an archaeological rather than a historical epistemological and methodological model. This explains not only how the robust opposition between archaeology and history translates into the archaeological foundations of Kulturwissenschaft (in opposition to the tradition of Geisteswissenschaft), but also why we find among the founding fathers of Kulturwissenschaft (like Freud, Benjamin and Foucault) so many authors of “wild archaeologies”.

The Reflectivity of Archaeology

One last common characteristic of all “wild archaeologies” is in fact what distinguishes them from history and from philosophy, namely the fact that they are all dealing with material self-descriptions of cultures. Archaeology can be interpreted as a privileged medium of the self-description of cultures: In self-reflective archaeology cultures are unearthing themselves; in the archaeological object cultures are rendering themselves intelligible, because this object is telling them what is important to them and
what is not. This self-reflectivity of archaeology follows the motto: "Show me a culture’s (or an epoch’s) archaeology, and we can deduce what is or was important to it." The best example of this self-reflective interpretation of archaeology is probably the current project of an archaeology of media, which directly follows a civilisation’s self-description as a media-based one (which is also why in popular consumer culture the openings of new media technology stores seem far more spectacular than any other branch of consumer culture). In this archaeological hermeneutics the object is the one missing element cultures need in order to understand themselves – no matter whether the object is a real archaeological artefact or metaphysics or media. In other words: With the formulation and establishment of a new archaeological object – be it metaphysics (Kant) or media (Kittler), souls (Freud) or knowledge (Foucault) – a culture or an epoch is now able to describe itself. So the archaeological action (or the “gesture of the archaeologist” with Agamben), be it wild and undisciplined archaeology or the discipline of archaeology proper, can be interpreted as the art of constructing the missing link to the self: As soon as a culture crystallises in a certain object – like our culture did a while ago in the classic art object from Greece or Rome, or, more recently, in the objects of media – it will formulate and establish a new archaeological object to search for.

This institution and establishment of new archaeological objects within the intellectual history of modernity is constant, continuous and incessant, as the sequence of “wild archaeologies” clearly shows; but at the same time it is anything but self-evident. It was not at all “natural” or “obvious” that, in a certain age not too long ago called classicism, a culture (it was ours) believed it could understand itself only by recourse and regression to another time: antiquity. Yet another time, the time of Kant, Enlightenment, believed it had to understand its own and all other metaphysics in order to establish itself: This was the birth of Kant’s “Archaeology of Metaphysics” or Philosophische Archäologie. Even more recently cultures believed they could find the key to human mysteries in the human soul and its hidden parts, which they decided to call the subconscious – which was the beginning of Freud’s “Archaeology of the Soul.”

And even today we are still not free from what could be called the curse of archaeology (what Richard Armstrong called the Compulsion for Antiquity). Today we believe that we need to retrieve objects as complicated as discourses, knowledge or media to reach a full understanding of ourselves and our civilisations: This was Foucault’s “Archaeology of Knowledge” and Kittler’s “Archaeology of Media.” However, in all of these cases we are establishing and instituting a missing object, the
archaeological object, which is constitutedly lost – and the search that leads up to it.

Therefore, every archaeological object is the consequence of a complicated cultural construction – with the result that it does not only tell us something about the past it once produced, but also about the present that demanded this search. In every case archaeology is the name of the cultural operation that renders this search and self-description possible; it reveals, in psychoanalytical terms, some kind of subconscious meaning of an age – a subconscious yet materialised, a “positive unconscious of knowledge,” borrowing from Foucault’s *Les Mots et les choses*. Following Foucault, archaeology could be described as the entire scientific and discursive frame or dispositive that makes it possible to spend such massive cultural resources on the search for this one object in which a culture renders itself intelligible. Therefore, the archaeological operation is a rather complex one, which cannot be reduced to finding treasures in the sand. Although most archaeologies are indeed still searching for an “object” – archaeological artefacts as well as discourses, knowledge or media – it takes an entire culture to construct and establish this object, which is also why archaeology is the name of an unusual cultural extravagance and *dépense* (to use, once again, Georges Bataille’s concept) that is necessary for producing the meaningful framework in which we live and in which we do research. In this research the means required to find a given object are therefore correlative to its very significance for a given culture: The more resources it spends on finding an object, the more meaningful it must be for this culture, and the more meaningful a given object is for a culture, the more unfatiguing it will search for it. In other words, in the heart of any archaeological action (or, with Agamben, in the “gesture of the archaeologist”) lies not the act of finding, but the art of searching: Archaeology is the construction of a cultural search that produces its own object – which makes archaeology the name of the search for our cultural constructions of secrecy; it is the art of establishing hidden, secret objects in which a culture tells itself its full meaning. It is with archaeology’s help that a culture can tell itself what really means something to that culture – which makes any archaeology the art of searching rather than the art of finding.

Notes


15. Ibid., 128. Translation by the author.

16. Ibid. Translation by the author.

17. Ibid., 113. Translation by the author.

18. Ibid., 134. Translation by the author.

19. Ibid. Translation by the author.


