book review

Elsaesser, Thomas. **Film History as Media Archeology: Tracking Digital Cinema.** Amsterdam University Press, 2016.

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What is the place of film studies in a cultural, economic, and academic landscape in which cinema struggles to resist its own obsolescence, let alone to ignore its many reported deaths? This question, to which several representatives of the discipline have attempted to supply some cautious answers throughout the last two decades, has become obsolescent in turn. Extensive reflexivity is already a staple of contemporary film studies as much as of contemporary cinema. According to Thomas Elsaesser, the alleged marginality of cinema—an invisibility due to its ubiquity rather than to its actual disappearance—represents a challenge to be addressed with new tools, for today "cinema is ever more part of life, which is to say, ever more omnipresent, filling not only each available screen but every accessible space" (386). *Film History as Media Archaeology* constitutes a remarkable effort to redraw the borders of film studies, coming from a scholars who for almost half a century has irregularly but profoundly contributed to, if not shaped, a dazzling variety of debates within the field. Divided in six chapters ("Early Cinema," "The Challenge of Sound," "Archaeologies of Interactivity," "Digital Cinema," "New Genealogies of Cinema," and "Media Archaeology as Symptom"), this collection aims at proposing a different archaeology for the cinema, which, while acknowledging the multiplicity and changing functions of the medium, allows the reader to glimpse "a different future out of differently understood past" (66). Faithful to the belief that "cinema has many histories, only some of which belong to the movies" (259), Elsaesser reframes through the lens of media archaeology a consistent part of his writings on film history spanning over eighteen years—the least recent piece being the somehow prescient "Digital Cinema: Delivery, Event, Time" from 1998.

A penetrating general introduction addresses the main theoretical issues of the book, also providing an agenda and a project framework. Media archaeology, in Elsaesser's view, is a means to revitalize film history, reassess its potential for the future ("archaeology wants what it finds to be maintained, defined, and carried forward," 19), and rectify the beliefs of the late New Film History. Three, in particular, are the sites where the exploration of the possibilities of "film history as media archaeologies" are most intensely carried out throughout the volume—that is, early cinema, the digital turn, and moving-image-based art. The first, in many respects the most traditional, elaborates upon New Film History's main assumptions, whose scope is here extended to the point of encompassing cross-media configurations, overlapping and competing technologies, and various alternative "family resemblances." The digital, first and foremost, is a heuristic device and a moment of cultural rupture: Its overnight appearance caused a series of crises

(narrative, representation, causality) that challenged the old-fashioned conceptions of cinema straightforwardly derived from Renaissance perspective, modern optics, and photography, and paved the way to new historiographical models. Media archaeology itself, Elsaesser maintains, should be understood as a reaction to and a symptom of these crises. Nonetheless, it is also a set of principles for ordering knowledge with all the comforts of a professedly anarchical methodology, ultimately covering what perhaps might be considered as "the ideology of the digital" (383). Finally, moving-image-based art—that is, the museum's archaeological impulse in media and installation art—reflects some structural contradictions of media archaeology, such as its dialectical relation with capitalism and technology, the unquestioned fetishization of obsolescence, and its ethical and ecological dimension. Along these lines, original theoretical questions (narrative and interactivity, spectatorship and experience, new media epistemologies, energy and entropy) gain a centrality for media archaeology seldom recognized, while more conventional ones (memory and the archive, the cinematic dispositif, materialism, and the politics of media archaeology) benefit from the fresh perspectives engendered by positing the cinema at the center of this project.

Every essay, in fact, compels the reader to reconsider the relation between film history and media archaeology in challenging, though-provoking ways, even staking out the ground for a more radical reconceptualization of film theory—it is worth mentioning, among the most intriguing interventions, at least "Cinema, Motion, Energy, and Entropy," "Media Archaeology as a Symptom," and "The 'Return' of 3D." Yet, the fragmentary nature of the collection requires an effort of diligence, for not only recurrent themes and ideas surface repeatedly in many essays, but their connotations often bring to the fore the afterthoughts that a twenty-year-long reflection necessarily implies, even though it is the reader's task to trace back these shifts. The meaning of media archaeology, which Elsaesser can claim to have helped define, keeps assuming different shades from essay to essay, as reading the book in chronological order makes quite evident. For instance, in the 2005 pioneering essay "New Film History as Media Archaeology,"

the latter is defined as "nothing more than the name for non-place space and the suspension of temporal flows the film historian needs to occupy when trying to articulate rather than merely accommodate these several alternative, counterfactual, or parallax histories around which any study of the cross-media moving image culture now unfolds" (99). Ten years later, hinting at the extraordinary scholarship on the topic produced in the last decade, media archaeology becomes a "catchword" (351), "a travelling discipline without fixed boundaries," with "no discernible methodology and no common objective" (352), a candidate substitute and supplement for film history. Read against the grain, these shifts reveal a crystallization of the discipline (or the method, or the practice) during the last decade far from Elsaesser's own proposition but nonetheless participating in a vital exchange with it. This makes the reading all the more exciting.

A key aspect running throughout the book but hardly addressed as such is the political dimension of the project, to which Elsaesser points less often than expected, especially since many insights (on industry, commodification, new media technologies, scarcity and obsolescence, and so on) clearly suggest a materialist understanding of the potential of media archaeology. It is a project—and a political one, clearly—that requires broader and deeper outcomes that the applications presented by the book as case studies, since their reach cannot but indicate opportunities for future research, as the author willingly admits in numerous occasions. The seeds, however, have been sown: At the time when both media archaeology and film studies, in their own isolation, look like barren fields, their mutual interdependence might be able to produce a more vivid landscape.