Ephemeral Media: Countering Transience through Alternative and Participatory (Meta-)Archiving

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We cannot study or teach film and other media without an awareness of their precarious materiality—including their potential fragility and ephemerality, and the ever-present danger of obsolescence. Encouraging students to become actively involved in diverse forms of variable media preservation and digital historiography is one of the most effective ways to directly make them aware of the transient nature of media technologies we often take for granted and, furthermore, of the impact this ephemerality has on the shaping of often exclusionary or limiting media histories. Making new intellectual and practical contributions to film and media studies is a central objective in both my research and my praxis-oriented pedagogy. Creating new resources to accompany obscure or under-documented areas of media historiography, for instance, should not be seen as secondary to the research but, rather, an essential component of the process of covering new epistemological ground. My teaching practice, like my research, overtly acknowledges the political, economic, and institutional implications of the practical issues of access, preservation, and circulation of ephemeral and site-specific media. How can we teach media histories when the objects of study are disappearing or already obsolete? What are the pedagogical implications of teaching the histories of transient media when opportunities for students to experience these media are either limited or non-existent?

In the context of teaching film and media, the absence of the primary texts themselves—for reasons including a lack of archiving and preservation efforts, material disintegration, state censorship, and colonialism—can productively stimulate an anachronistic recreation of their contexts as a process of memorialization and historiography that is not materially focused. In other words, modes of subjective, speculative, and fragmentary media historiography and archaeology can be generative in terms of not only producing new critical contexts but also stimulating new questions about what it means to study and narrativize the past.

In tracing, for instance, multiple trajectories for cinema's pasts—and, consequently, cinema's futures—we must make room for new epistemological discoveries, and for productive discontinuities alongside unexpected overlaps. Thomas Elsaesser notes that sometimes gaps in our understanding of the past are seen as gaps in our knowledge, but "one would be careful not simply to fill in the blanks with new 'facts' before considering that a 'missing link' may well have its own meaning—as a gap" (2004, 104). As Paolo Cherchi Usai has famously asserted:

> Cinema history is born out of an absence. Since, if all moving images were present in their original state, there would be no history of cinema; history can only explain why these images have disappeared, and their hypothetical value in the cultural memory of an epoch. (1988, 230)

Instead of apocalyptic and irreversible, the so-called *death of cinema*—whether in terms of the disappearance of material filmic objects or of original conditions of exhibition and reception—can conversely be considered as generative for new modes of historiography and media archaeology.[1]

The burden of conclusive contextualization for objects of study can be lessened by the acknowledgment that there is value in our own analytical excavation of ephemeral and forgotten media, as a mnemonic placeholder for something that once was. The productive aspect of this acknowledgement is that our own subjectivity can play a part in ushering a new era of socially connected and interpersonal historiography that accounts for historical and material distance to create new paradigms of variable media analysis. This is all to say that a reflexive approach to issues of media access and preservation should be part of historical research and should constitute a more transparent and self-reflexive research methodology. Rather than using new technologies to smooth over the gaps of the past and attempt to answer unanswerable questions, we should adopt a more critical stance toward the tools we use to access and remediate audiovisual materials.

In addition to a reflexive approach toward the tools and interfaces we use to access and document older media or their traces, we should additionally approach media objects as self-contained *anarchives* that, in the Foucauldian sense, transcend conventional definitions and official functions of the archive and, instead, engage in "anarcheological" work (Zielinski and Winthrop-Young 2015, 121). Anarchives encompass variable possibilities rather than singular *originals* and hierarchical indexes: varying materialities (including software and hardware), multiple histories, different memories, and diverse sociocultural approaches.

To put theory into practice, the rest of this article describes specific collaborative, amateur, and DIY initiatives for accessing, archiving, and remediating nearly obsolete complex media and their fragmented histories that I have undertaken with my students. In particular, some main projects related to the histories and traditions of interactive cinema—including Interactive Media Archive: Collaborative Multimedia Resource, InterArchive: Digital Repository of Older New Media and More, and Interactive Media Exhibition—will be discussed as new models of participatory

media archaeology, collaborative historiography, and archival remix.[2]

Because most pre-digital and multisensory forms of interactive cinema were not deemed historically important or were dismissed as gimmicky—or, as in the case of many avant-garde examples, were intended to be short-lived—there is, retrospectively, a significant lack of documentation, archival practices, conservation, and even basic information about their actual content. Therefore, part of my research and pedagogy inevitably resembles a scavenger hunt for these *old(er) new media* forms. In my book, *Interactive Cinema: The Ambiguous Ethics of Media Participation* (Hassapopoulou 2024), I reflect on the difficulties of gaining access to such works and the function of electronic traces in ephemeral complex media historiography. I explore various cinematic practices that work to transform what is often seen as a primarily receptive activity into a participatory, multimedia experience, and particularly a range of largely transient and site-specific projects that consciously assimilate viewers into their production.

Media ephemerality was often regarded by artists as an inevitable and even welcome by-product of site-specific happenings (1950s and later), expanded cinema experiments, early computer films (1960s and later), and early disc- and net-based interactive media art (1990s and early 2000s). Compounded by the scarcity in documentation, archiving initiatives, and software and hardware preservation noted above, this ephemerality has created significant deficits in our collective memory of these important works. How can we study and teach these ephemeral media when opportunities to (re)experience them are scarce or simply non-existent? My research and pedagogy are responsive to these issues of physical access and material, mnemonic, and virtual preservation, and develop hybrid adaptable methodologies that take into consideration the instability of a time-based media object's variable reception contexts, its evanescence, and its ever-changing form.

Over a decade ago, I launched the Interactive Media Archive, which has since grown into a repository and incubator of student projects dedicated to ephemeral and site-specific media and their often-neglected histories. The website began by featuring student-produced analyses and documentation of a wide range of interactive media in order to supplement the theoretical discourse on interactivity and media participation with more subjective, audience-oriented, and experiential perspectives. This amateur, DIY, makeshift *archival* process often involves taking screenshots as documentation, recording playthroughs and reaction videos, creating videographic analyses, piecing together fragmentary digital traces, creating low-budget emulators, and recreating the social, cultural, and political histories of the media in question. These makeshift resources are akin to what Abigail De Kosnik calls "rogue archives" whose content "would never likely be contained in a traditional memory institution" (2016, 3). De Kosik even goes as far as to predict that "the repertoire of [amateur and ad hoc] digital archive building that has been pioneered over the past few decades will likely outlast any actual archives that have been built" (7). The process of compiling new repositories is thus more reflexive and meta-archival than *professional*, as it is not overly focused on an impossibly *authentic* reproduction or material conservation of primary media but, rather, places second-hand subjective encounters with the

traces of historical artifacts at the forefront. Preservation, in broader terms here, takes the form of memorialization through analysis and fragmentary recontextualization of the materials that remain.

As an example of the type of student work included in the Interactive Media Archive, I will mention the media archaeology projects that are part of my "Interactive Cinema and New Media" course, which is offered both as an advanced undergraduate seminar and a graduate seminar.[3] These projects enable students to have hands-on interaction with older modes of digital participatory cinema that are mainly in the form of CD- and DVD-ROMs or their emulators. Thanks to the Cinema Studies department's embedded Moving Image Archiving and Preservation (MIAP) master's program, I have been fortunate to work with MIAP alumni and technicians on preserving and emulating our complex media collection that contains a wide range of early disc-based forms of interactive media arts. Students access the media collection on site to reflexively analyze the works, paying special attention to the affordances and limitations of accessing variable media through newer hardware and software (including emulators).[4] The inevitable glitches and lags that students encounter in this media archaeology assignment—normally seen as annoyances that prevent seamless content interaction—are instead reframed as instrumental to how we perceive mediated encounters with the past. Students thus experientially grapple with issues of digital transience and actively propose ways in which media archaeology can function as a creative sandbox of re-mediation and remixing of *original* content in new ways.

The media archaeology assignment is a productive way for students to realize that the digital is not a singular, monolithic period in media-making history, and that, in actuality, there are multiple phases of what can be categorized as electronic and digital media technology. By exploring various historical examples of cinematic interactivity, students become aware that each of the phases of so-called digital evolution has its own particularities that are connected to the specificity of the software, hardware, and other materially specific aspects. Therefore, this activity serves to highlight that, contrary to popular assumption, the *digital* is not immaterial and disembodied. Rather, anything digital is always tied to the apparatuses that *immaterialize* it and, consequently, those apparatuses—whether analogue or other—are always at the mercy of temporal progression, whether that means material disintegration over time or updates in hardware or software that result in past loss.

Collectively, the media archaeology projects have so far covered a diverse spectrum of interactive disc-based artworks from the 1990s and early 2000s, as well as a unique cross-cultural range spanning from Europe and the Balkans, to Asia, the U.S., and Australia. These projects collectively provide a much more nuanced and layered impression of *digital cinema* through an examination of some of its now almost neglected earlier phases, in addition to our study of other early electronic media, including computer films made between the 1960s and 1990s and early-2000s software-generated cinema in class. The assignment not only experientially teaches students what it means to conduct media-archaeological study, but it also generates new content—related to precarious media—that serves as a form of memorialization

and experimental historiography. By excavating hidden layers and alternative paths of media traditions, the resulting student projects exemplify Erkki Huhtamo's notion of media-archaeological art as "a form of spatialized, conversational 'historical writing,' as a way of maintaining a dialogue with the technological past" (1995).

In the Fall 2024 semester, the media archaeology project culminated in a larger curatorial project that coincided with the book celebration events for *Interactive Cinema* in November 2024. For the curatorial project, students virtually and physically curated an Interactive Media Exhibition featuring some of the ephemeral CD- and DVD-ROM works covered in the book and beyond. As a class, we all collectively worked on aspects of the exhibition, including the website, catalogue, design, organization, and artist and participant interviews. Since we were working with a very low budget and other limitations, the curatorial project has productively challenged students to creatively come up with DIY and low-budget, low-tech curatorial models that have the potential of providing more democratized—or bottom-up participatory—and sustainable alternatives to more traditional institutional models of media curation and archiving. The curatorial project has provided an opportunity to put into practice Garnet Hertz and Jussi Parikka's notion of *zombie media*—forgotten and repressed media that come back to life in new forms and through new contexts and interfaces. According to Hertz and Parikka, zombie media have the capacity to circuit bend media archaeology into an art method that not only excavates the past, but also actively reassembles the past into new and forward-moving work that challenges the political economy of technology and runs counter to the "planned obsolescence" of consumer culture by recycling, hacking, and repurposing older media forms (2012, 425).

Over the years, and with an increasing number of online visitors from several parts of the world, the Interactive Media Archive has expanded into a non-traditional, multi-authored, and multi-cultural research platform. The site now includes teaching resources, final student projects, collaborative class assignments, alternative modes of writing such as multisensory visualization projects with a teaching guide, and the aforementioned, ongoing media archaeology and curatorial projects.[5]

Students' intellectual and material labour is frequently undervalued within the traditional humanities and, arguably, even more exacerbated in large-scale digital humanities initiatives that often leave uncredited the labour students do behind the scenes. The ongoing projects and initiatives I discuss in this article aim to highlight the importance of student contributions to building new resources for research and creative development. By becoming content creators rather than only content consumers, students not only have a bigger stake in the expansion and critical interrogation of the fields they are studying but also help shape their future directions. Publishing and making student projects visible online through the Interactive Media Archive and the Interactive Media Exhibition websites validates their contributions to the production of new inquiry and innovative multimedia scholarship, and ensures it is archived and available for future reference and to inspire fellow students and educators. Some of my students and I also co-authored a chapter for *The Handbook of Remix Studies and Digital Humanities* titled "Hacking the Digital Humanities:

Critical Practice and DIY Pedagogy" (Hassapopoulou et al. 2021), featuring projects curated on the Interactive Media Archive. Collaborating with my students for this theory-practice chapter, as well as brainstorming together to produce an *extended* interactive augmented reality version of our writing, has resulted in what I hope is the first of many fruitful initiatives to co-produce new syntheses of pedagogy *and* research alongside, rather than distinct from, our students.

In conjunction with the Interactive Media Archive, my latest in-progress project is InterArchive, a digital repository and meta-archive of nearly obsolete media featured in my book, with contributions from artists' archives and cultural institutions. While it does not feature student contributions yet, the site is meant to function as a pedagogical resource for teaching the histories of disappearing media, and it advocates for greater accessibility to collections related to the prehistory of the digital humanities. In my courses on interactive media, I use InterArchive to teach about issues of media access and preservation, as well as to highlight the benefits of DIY *memory archives* as alternatives or complements to institutional big-budget archival projects and conservation. The InterArchive site serves the dual purpose of preserving the memory, history, and meta-media of often neglected ephemeral works, and of reflexively creating a repository that proposes several approaches to writing about—and capturing—transient media encounters. Furthermore, I provide suggestions for media preservation and remediation practices that attempt to counter the ephemerality of digital work, and some practical recommendations for ethically sharing content containing copyrighted material. The Interactive Media Archive and the InterArchive both reflect on and propose different ways of conducting (meta)archival work in precarious digital environments with precarious media and tools.

The above-mentioned rogue anarchives' makeshift, open-ended, and low-budget means of collectively creating, documenting, curating, and analyzing ephemeral media is appropriate, given the informal and ad hoc conditions through which many of the featured media archaeology projects came to exist in the first place. These rogue anarchives are meant to inspire students and fellow educators to think beyond institutional and academic boxes. Through amateur, collaborative, and experimental modes of knowledge production, students can have an active stake in the future development of their fields of study, and even provide viable alternatives to institutional paradigms of archival creation and cultural preservation.[6]

Notes

[1] For a discussion of one of the possible resurrections of cinema, in this case in/through the gallery, see Erika Balsom (2009).

[2] You can visit these projects at https://interactivemediaarchive.wordpress.com, https://interarchive.net, and https://interactivemediaexhibition.net/, respectively.

[3] You can review some of these projects at https://interactivemediaarchive.wordpress.com/2024/10/19/media-archaeology-projects-updated-for-fall-2024/.

[4] Our former MIAP technician, Ethan Gates, details the beginning of the media archaeology initiative on his blog. See https://patchbay.tech/blog/2017/09/29/class-

room-access-to-interactive-dvds/.

[5] You can view these resources at https://interactivemediaarchive.wordpress.com/2020/12/11/online-teaching/, https://interactivemediaarchive.wordpress.com/visualizations, and https://interactivemediaarchive.wordpress.com/2022/11/01/more-media-archeology-projects. New additions are posted on the main page every semester. You can also view sample projects and writing at https://marinahassap.wordpress.com/interactive-pedagogy/.

[6] The Interactive Media Archive has also inspired the creation of other resources that were designed to fill in gaps in existing histories, theories, and practices, including the Transformations online directory, which is focused on cross-pollinations between cinema, media studies, and digital humanities, and, most recently, Expressive AI, dedicated to the history of cinematic, activist, and civic engagement through creative experiments with artificial intelligence and computation. A growing initiative that I launched with students from my "Greek Weird Wave" courses is the Weird Wave Archive, which is the first English-language site dedicated to the study of contemporary Greek Cinema and other *weird wave* cinemas that emerged during times of sociopolitical crisis. It aims to serve as a resource for marginalized cinemas from various cross-cultural perspectives.

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