



/ Five Principles of Zombie Media ^[1]

Garnet Hertz & Jussi Parikka

Zombie media addresses the living deads of media culture. As such, it is clearly related to the earlier calls to investigate “dead media” by Bruce Sterling and others: to map the forgotten, out-of-use, obsolete and judged dysfunctional technologies in order to understand better the nature of media cultural development. And yet, we want to point to a further issue when it comes to abandoned media: the amount of discarded electronic media is not only the excavation ground for quirky media archaeological interests, but one of the biggest threats for ecology in terms of the various toxins they are leaking back to nature. A discarded piece of media technology is never just discarded but part of a wider pattern of circulation that ties obsolescence to recycling centers, dismantling centres in Asia, markets in Nigeria, and so forth – a whole global political ecology of different sorts where one of the biggest questions is the material toxicity of our electronic media. Media kills nature as they remain as living deads.

Hence, we believe that media archaeology – the media theoretical stance interested in forgotten paths and quirky ideas of past media cultures – needs to become more political, and articulate its relation to design practices more clearly. We are not the only ones that have made that call recently – for instance Timothy Druckrey writes:

“The mere rediscovery of the forgotten, the establishment of oddball paleontologies, of idiosyncratic genealogies, uncertain lineages, the excavation of antique technologies or images, the account of erratic technical developments, are, in themselves, insufficient to the building of a coherent discursive methodology.” [2]

We would want to add that in addition to developing discursive methodologies, we need to develop methodologies that are theoretically rich as well as practice-oriented – where ontologies of technical media meet up with innovative ideas concerning design in an ecological context.

As such, the other part of the zombie media call is the work of reappropriation through circuit bending and hardware hacking methodologies – to extend the media archaeological as well as ecosophic interest into design issues. By actively repurposing things considered dead – things you find from your attic, the second hand market, or amongst waste – the zombification of media is to address the planned obsolescence of media technologies which is part of their material nature. In reference to contemporary consumer products, planned obsolescence takes many forms. It is not only an ideology, or a discourse, but more accurately takes place on a micropolitical level of design: difficult to replace batteries in personal MP3 audio players, proprietary cables and chargers that are only manufactured for a short period of time, discontinued customer support, or plastic enclosures impossible to open without breaking them. Whether you can open up things – the famous black boxes of media culture characterized by iPhones and iPads – is one of the biggest political and ecological questions facing our media theory and practices too.

As a manifesto, five points of zombie media stand out:

1/

We oppose the idea of dead media. Although death of media may be useful as a tactic to oppose dialog that only focuses on the newness of media, we believe that media never dies. Media may disappear in a popular sense, but it never dies: it decays, rots, reforms, remixes, and gets historicized, reinterpreted and collected. It either stays as a residue in the soil and in the air as concrete dead media, or is reappropriated through artistic, tinkering methodologies.

2/

We oppose planned obsolescence. As one corner stone in the mental ecology of circulation of desires, planned obsolescence maintains ecologically unsupportable death drive that is destroying our milieu of living.

3/

We propose a depunctualization of media and the opening, understanding and hacking of concealed or blackboxed systems: whether as consumer products or historical archives.

4/

We propose media archaeology as an artistic methodology that follows in the traditions of appropriation, collage and remixing of materials and archives. Media archaeology has been successful in excavating histories of dead media, forgotten ideas, sidekicks and minor narratives, but now its time to develop it from a textual method into a material methodology that takes into account the political economy of contemporary media culture.

5/

We propose that reuse is an important dynamic of contemporary culture, especially within the context of electronic waste. “If it snaps shut, it shall snap open.” We agree in that open and remix culture should be extended to physical artifacts.

Notes

[1] This short essay is a part of our wider project which will be published in Leonardo-journal in 2012: Garnet Hertz and Jussi Parikka, “Zombie Media: Circuit Bending Media Archaeology into an Art Method”.

[2] Timothy Druckrey, “Foreword” in Siegfried Zielinski, Deep Time of the Media (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), ix.