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Archives in Media Theory: Material Media Archaeology and Digital Humanities

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In his recent French Theory lecture series, also available on the Internet in MP3-format, media theorist Alex Galloway starts his introduction on October 25 with a parallel to Karl Marx. Galloway reminds how Marx is often described as a product of the intellectual debates in Europe of his time, three to be exact: British political economy, German idealism and French socialism. Galloway's parallel continues with the Europe of today, its intellectual debates stemming to a large extent from three distinctive directions of German media theory, Italian political theory, and French philosophy. Whereas Galloway continues in his lecture series outlining the last of these three – French philosophy and its current trends, through figures such as Catherine Malabou, Bernard Stiegler, and Quentien Meillassoux – we can continue to elaborate on the parallel or the comparison with a further idea. Cognisant of the history of humanities as critical theory of the twentieth century, Marx's synthesis of these three forces – and, one might add, the synthesis of Marx together with Nietzsche and Freud – cannot be underestimated, and if one wants to quantify it as is so often necessary in the culture of digital economy, just count the amount of undergraduate and graduate courses directly or indirectly linking up with Marxist or post-Marxist philosophy. The humanities tradition has revolved around a set of key questions, and debates, which slightly pejoratively have been recently labelled from a digital humanities perspective as 'isms' – that the legacy of humanities is a closed world of debates such as 'formalism, freudianism, structuralism, postcolonialism' (Cohen 2010), and that the future is beyond theory in the sense of going directly to data. Whereas this sounds in various ways a new guise for certain strands of positivism with a fair amount of distrust in theory, it also outlines some crucial points for the wider public about digital humanities. Digital humanities, it seems, is a way to deal with large data sets and hence provide new *digital* methodologies for analysis of our non-digital

cultural heritage – texts, images, archival material. What's more, often the discourse does not fail to mention the hefty support from companies (such as Google) or The National Endowment for Humanities for such projects, which is furthermore another reason for arts and humanities institutions that are currently struggling in terms of their funding to find new ways of making themselves viable again.

Whereas the discourse and practices in digital humanities has to a large extent been driven by practical needs looking at older humanities formations – digitalisation of archival material, manuscripts, canonical works and resources, the implications of network and virtual platforms for research collaboration, as well as teaching, digital libraries, literacy, and preservation – perhaps the needed step is to think the theoretical underpinnings of digital humanities in the context of the various intellectual traditions that formed the basis of what we used to call 'critical theory'. This article does not take 'critique' as its standing point, or horizon, nor is it going to offer Marxist insights into digital humanities nor is it going to act as an explicit defence of 'isms', but I want to continue on the idea that Galloway pointed towards. If contemporary European thought can be mapped along those three lines, German media theory (started by figures such as Friedrich A. Kittler), Italian political thought (emblematic through Antonio Negri, Maurizio Lazzarato, Franco Berardi, Tiziana Terranova, and others), and French philosophy (names that Galloway introduced, and following the wake of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and others), then how much would a digital humanities discourse actually benefit from being able to articulate a strongly theoretical stance, and talk through the implications offered by media theory and its relation to politics of the digital? In other words, what I am after is how we could actually find a common tune between the meticulous analyses offered by German media theorists, but so that we could through Italian political philosophy understand how such media techniques, or psychotechnologies to use a term that both Kittler and French philosophers as Bernard Stiegler share, contribute to ways in which the digital is recirculating power.

This chapter does not discuss philosophy, but rather media theory and especially the notion of the archive. I will introduce the centrality of the concept of 'archive' for understanding contemporary digital culture with a special emphasis on how it contributes to radical ways of understanding digital humanities in technical software and hardware culture. This chapter works through the highly original media theory, or media archaeology as he himself calls it, of Wolfgang Ernst. Ernst is professor of Media Sciences at Humboldt University in Berlin and one of the leading figures of current German debates around media archaeology and media theory. With a background as a classicist, and as a historian, Ernst however has increasingly turned to media theory, and pushed his analysis of the archival into directions which point towards its