

On Media Archaeology and Literary Studies

An Interview with Andrew Burkett

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How did you get interested in media studies and media archaeology?

Thank you for this question and especially for inviting me to take part in this interview. I trace my interests in media studies to my days as a graduate student at Duke University, where Fredric Jameson urged me to explore a set of connections that I was finding between early silent film and the aesthetic theory of Theodor Adorno, which I had been studying under his guidance. This work in film studies and theory opened a door for me at Duke to widen my interests in media studies to a range of other fields and disciplines such as Digital Humanities and critical game studies and—perhaps most important to my development as a scholar—to the history, philosophy, and theory of nineteenth-century media (for example, photography, phonography, and so on). I quickly realized that my main research interests centered on the connections among the technology, science, and imaginative literature of the British Romantic period, and Robert Mitchell took me on as one of his first graduate students to study in these areas. At the time, Rob's work was focusing on systems and network theory and Romantic studies, among a range of other topics, and he introduced me early on to the writings of Friedrich Kittler, who I quickly came to realize had himself traced much of his own early interests in media studies and theory to various European Romanticisms.

Kittler's body of work took on a long gestational period in my own scholarship but eventually helped me to start to unlock the answers to a set of research questions that I began exploring in my first monograph, *Romantic Mediations* (2016), and which ultimately led me to the field of media archaeology. I had stumbled upon William Henry Fox Talbot's early negative-positive photograph of the final handwritten stanza of Lord Byron's *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte*



William Blake, *Europe. A Prophecy*, Plate 6, "The shrill winds wake. ..." (Bentley 7), Copy A (1794). Credit: Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

(1814), and I realized that textual, hermeneutic, and other traditional scholarly approaches simply were not going to be enough to help me to unravel the complex convergence of media materialities that I was finding in this case study focusing on the connections between early photography and Romantic literature and culture. The careful and detailed approaches to the affordances of media materialities and histories set forth in the media archaeological methodologies of Wolfgang Ernst, Lisa Gitelman, Jussi Parikka, Siegfried Zielinski, and others opened up an entirely

new way for me to think about the types of case studies that I was exploring at the interface between Romantic studies and media studies.

How do you think media theory can be related to literary theory? You've worked on texts that already have a long critical tradition. How can media archaeology contribute to literary analysis in new and significant ways?

This is a huge, though important, question. I follow the crucial work of Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark in answering it because I largely agree with these thinkers in approaching media specifically as having achieved the status of conceptual objects. I also agree that scholars of literature in particular would do well to relax tight grips on the idea that the literary should exist as the main—or only—object in practices of reading. Doing so does serious injustice to the mediatic status of conceptual objects and does so often solely in the name of hermeneutic traditions. As Galloway, Thacker, and Wark so eloquently express and convincingly document in *Excommunication* (2014), the mediatic status of objects—and especially the media materialities so important to a range of fields including media archaeology—become importantly reinvoked and resituated once we reposition literary theory under the banner of a more primary media theory. I generally agree with their stance on this topic because, as I see it, a more fundamentally media theoretical approach allows for explorations of the myriad relationships of textuality to media and does so contra to, for example, more traditional approaches foregrounding how the literary becomes accessible from textuality.

In researching and writing *Romantic Mediations*, I came to realize the synergy and complementarity of literary and media archaeological methods. Among the resonances that stick with me to this day—and that I somehow didn't foresee or expect to find in both approaches, though which are patently obvious in retrospect—are the shared values of the case study and the practices of close reading. To begin with the latter, Formalist and New Critical methodologies have of course long emphasized close reading practices, and although the method has clearly never been abandoned, it is a significant sign, I would argue, that critics of Romanticism like Sara Guyer and others have felt the need to step in and attempt to bring close reading back to the forefront of critical attention in the field. And as for the former, James Chandler exposed some time ago now the critical importance of the case study to literary studies and perhaps particularly

to Romantic studies.

All of that said, media archaeology also opens up entirely new possibilities for Romantic literary studies, I have found, by allowing research to broach historical and theoretical investigations of embryonic and developmental media systems issuing from the period itself while simultaneously invoking not only fundamental but also sometimes hyper-specific questions about the relationship between Romanticism and modern technical media (systems) in all of their various formations—realized, dead, imaginary, and otherwise. This is in part because, on the one hand, media archaeological methodologies unearth unique ways to theorize and historicize anew the specific media materialities of a given conceptual object, and, on the other hand, because of media archaeology's capacities to place such media materialities in dialectical relationships with textual, formalist, historicist, and other traditional literary methodologies.

In your book *Romantic Mediations: Media Theory and British Romanticism* you mention a “Romantic media studies” paradigm. Could you tell us more about this paradigm?

Romantic media studies is a dynamic, vital, and growing subfield in Romantic studies, and it has an important scholarly history that stretches back several decades in the field. Early scholarship in this area included such various topics as print and oral cultures, nineteenth-century media discourse, history of the book, Romantic visual cultures, publishing empires and their histories, and so forth, and more recent work in this subfield has addressed contemporary histories and philosophies of media and mediation as well as Romantic media materialities, communications networks, and storage and processing media. So, it's quite a vast field of scholarship, really, that includes voices ranging, on the one hand, from M. H. Abrams, Geoffrey Hartman, and Walter Ong to the more recent work of thinkers like Clifford Siskin, William Warner, Celeste Langan, Maureen McLane, Yohei Igarashi, Kevis Goodman, and others. Langan and McLane's influential 2008 essay “The Medium of Romantic Poetry,” in particular, really set the ball rolling in defining this subfield and marking out its goals and parameters for Romanticists today.

I'm so glad you asked this question because it also gives me the chance to address what I have come to understand as something of a mischaracterization of Kittler's work that has come up not only in my own writings on this topic but also in the

work of others contributing to this subfield. Projects in this area have often presumed that—for both the Romantics and for us today as Romanticists—the human always comes first and is then mediated by technologies and cultural techniques. And here I'm thinking of, for instance, the recurring reactionary argument in much Romantic media studies scholarship—including my own—against Kittler, who is often sidelined or simply overlooked due to his putative techno-determinism. But, really, one does have to embrace Kittler's emphasis on the non-human to understand him as anything other than a commentator on Ong or Marshall McLuhan. The problem is that much contemporary Romantic media theory continues to see Kittler as a philosopher who applies McLuhan, for example, to the Romantic period rather than as a theorist who uses the seeming lack of media technology in the period as both the lever and fulcrum to place ever more emphasis on the affordances of different media as agents in their own right. Indeed, one needs only to turn to Geoffrey Winthrop-Young's recent interpretation in *Kittler and the Media* (2011) of Kittler's reading of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's poetry in order to begin to grasp the implications of a Romantic media studies revitalized by a return to Kittlerian media theory and analysis.

The fact that media isn't a concept quite yet in the Romantic period (*vis-à-vis* John Guillory's "media concept") is actually a benefit to the proto-Romantic media theory of intellectuals such as Goethe as well as to the Wordsworthian/Cole-ridgian axis of media history and theory because it illustrates that mediation isn't simply a concept—it's a material process whose enactment gives rise to a concept (and here I'm thinking of Richard Grusin's work on "radical mediation"). That is, the concept of mediation comes after the metacognitive (and perhaps unconscious) production of imaginative art, literature, and other cultural techniques by Romantic intellectuals. On a broader historical plain: is it that the Romantics created ideas that were later repeated, or is it—and again following Grusin—that mediation itself is something that gives rise to Romanticism as a literary or historical concept and category? One can certainly say, on a superficial level, that repetition is what makes any historical period possible; Gilles Deleuze of course argues this in *Difference and Repetition* (1968). Relatedly, Deleuze's anger and frustration in that text with psychoanalysis is due to its presumption that human subjectivity arrives first and that then we repeat rather than the other way around. Analogously, Romantic media theory issuing from the period itself—and in the Romantic media studies scholarship you ask about—often similarly presumes that human subjectivity is primary and is then mediated by

technologies and cultural techniques. Thus, with specific reference to the turn of the nineteenth century, Romanticism is an experience of repetition or the afterlife of mediation and the resultant anxiety that authors aren't always fully responsible for this mediation but that it comes from somewhere else. Chandler almost gets here in *England in 1819* (1998), but for a range of important reasons, he's too beholden in that work to a New Historicist belief that human beings are the primary actors in history, and for many reasons, rightly so.

At the same time, though—and to wrap up here—the Romantics were already suspecting—however faintly—a deeper repetition beyond the human, making history possible. It's William Wordsworth feeling a spontaneous overflow of emotion that only makes sense to him when he recuperates that overwhelming feeling of otherness within nature, psychology, and human memory. It's Victor Frankenstein ripping up the body of the female monster in horror because allowing another creature to have children and have companionship is apparently potentially equal to enabling another race or species to destroy human society. It's even Samuel Taylor Coleridge sitting and listening to the Aeolian harp or looking at the creeping frost on his windowpane and immediately thinking of his own marriage, children, and domestic life. In these and other Romantic-age instances, repetition must only be produced by human subjectivity, or it must be disavowed, denied, and immediately destroyed. And, in this context, much recent media theory in Romantic media studies has itself also repeated a particular formation of Romanticism—not only by theorizing mediation but also by recuperating the human subject and marginalizing the non-human other—and especially non-human agency—under the banner of a rejection of a threatening technological determinism.

Your work on Romanticism was deliberately situated at a crossroads between media studies and Romantic studies. Could you indicate how it impacts on the widespread notion in Romantic studies of “Romantic Ideology” and whether you plan to continue this research in the future? And, in any case, we would like to know what you are working on now in relation to Romanticism.

This is a thought-provoking question regarding the role of Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology* (1983) in relation to my work in *Romantic Mediations* and perhaps more broadly to the developing methodologies of what I refer to at the end of that book as a nascent “Romantic media archaeology” for the field. To

be honest, I don't believe that McGann's "Romantic Ideology" was consciously a source or spur to my work in that book and that, if it was, it structured my goals and methods at such a fundamental level that my response to the "Romantic Ideology" was baked in from the start as part of the DNA, so to speak, of my assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives on not only Romantic media archaeology but also where the broader field of Romantic studies finds itself today. But now that I stop to think about the topic in response to your fascinating question, I readily see the ways in which my aims and methods have been so importantly shaped by McGann's recovery of the historical and especially the material dimensions of Romantic cultural production. Indeed, as many scholars in my field have recognized, McGann's work in so many ways set the terms and parameters for what would become the historicist approaches of the 1980s and beyond, and while I have paid tribute to Chandler and Marjorie Levinson as crucial spurs to my thought about Romantic media archaeologies as opening up critical, historical, and materialist dimensions of the period's imaginative and other cultural productions, this question's implication concerning the roots of such various enterprises in response to the "Romantic Ideology" is a key one that I think I'll want to dwell with for some time to come. Most immediately, though, what comes to mind for me here is that such putative roots would only further emphasize just how fundamentally Romantic media archaeology is indebted to New Historicist and other traditions in the field.

I'm currently researching and writing two projects that are outgrowths of my earlier work on Romanticism and media theory. I've recently been invited to contribute to a book exploring the ways in which contemporary digital artgames invoke Romantic-age philosophies, aesthetics, and ideas and have decided to focus my attention on two recent indie video games, both of which are engrossing and stunningly beautiful: the experimental artgame, *Elegy for a Dead World*, which was released in 2014 following a collaboration between Popcannibal's Ziba Scott and Dejobaan Games's Ichiro Lambe, as well as *The Wanderer: Frankenstein's Creature* (2019), an artgame from La Belle Games, co-produced and published by ARTE, the cultural European TV and digital channel. Inspired by the work of critical game theorists like Patrick Jagoda and Alenda Chang, I'm especially interested in the ways in which sublime representations of the natural world and other aspects of environmental aesthetics become depicted in these games as well as how users are asked to engage experimentally with sublime digital environments through player characters. My other ongoing project is a

book-length study of the emergence of the idea of “deep time,” or the discovery and articulation of the prehuman history of the planet, which occurred during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Centering on a set of case studies investigating how Romantic imaginative writers and intellectuals contributed to this budding natural historical paradigm, the book takes up, for instance, Walter Scott’s 1814 *Waverley* (arguably the first historical novel), Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem with Notes* (an 1813 quasi-scientific romance), and Wordsworth’s 1805 *The Prelude* (a spiritual autobiographical poetic epic) in order to explore the ways that such works consciously responded to James Hutton’s *Theory of the Earth* (1788, 1795), a text that laid the groundwork for the concept of what we now refer to as “deep time” to emerge, develop, and take root during the Romantic period. This project relies heavily on media archaeological methodologies taken up elsewhere in my writings but now brings such approaches to bear on, for instance, antiquarian objects of the period, early physical geoscientific models, intricate manuscript and book histories, and of course formalist, historicist, and other close readings of Romantic textualities.

What would you suggest to someone who is interested in analyzing literature from a media archaeological perspective?

I think that my first words of advice to those interested in studying imaginative literatures through this perspective would be to urge researchers not to be daunted by the fact that media archaeology has scarcely yet begun to influence literary scholars. As I mention in the coda of my book, that work is happening right now and is also still to be done, and that prospect is actually extremely exciting, especially given that media archaeology represents one of the most eclectic and productive interdisciplinary approaches to the field. I would also urge researchers to think expansively beyond traditional textual and other discursive archives of Foucauldian varieties. The groundbreaking work to come through the convergence of media archaeology and literary studies will be that research which takes seriously the mediatic status of conceptual objects in all of their multifarious varieties and which implicitly rejects traditional dichotomies of “literary” subjects and “media” objects.