Media Archaeology and the Discontents of Humanism
An Interview with Erkki Huhtamo

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An itinerant showman's peepshow box with its series of perspective views (vue d'optique). The box of views it fitted inside the view box during transportation. Central European, c. 1800. Erkki Huhtamo Collection, Los Angeles. Photo: David Leonard.

How did you become interested in media theory? Which authors have influenced you the most in your first years of studies?

My initiation into media studies began during my undergraduate days at the University of Turku, Finland, before 1980. It took different forms. It was not yet possible to study media or even film history analysis as independent disciplines, so we students had to invent those possibilities for ourselves with help from some

farsighted professors. I studied cultural history, comparative literature, art history & theory, and cultural anthropology. The professor of cultural history, Veikko Litzen, invested in one of the first Betamax video recorders in town. A group of students (which I led) began using it weekly to record films from TV and to study them frame by frame. It felt like a revolutionary possibility to peek into the unknown. On the side, we read and discussed apparatus theory, semiotics, and structural film analysis by Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry, Laura Mulvey, and many others. Beside attending film club screenings, that was my 'school of film theory'.

I became fascinated with the cultural semiotics of Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, and applied it in some of my earliest published studies to comic strips, music videos, coffee advertising, and the pop art of Roy Lichtenstein. Reading media culture through signs was a discovery, which helped me to bring together areas normally considered as separate in the academia. I was interested in 'everything', and I still am. Like Eco, I was simultaneously involved with popular culture and the avant-garde, the past and the present. My scholarly work was connected with practical activities - exhibitions, seminars, and festivals. I was part of a team that created a ground-breaking exhibition on the 'Batman craze' in Finland in the 1960s, organized screenings of experimental filmmakers and video artists, and curated exhibitions of interactive art showing works by Jeffrey Shaw, Lynn Hershman, Toshio Iwai, Perry Hoberman, and others. That was my 'school of media art'.

I was also intrigued by topos study, inspired first by Ernst Robert Curtius and some years later by Aby Warburg. I originally wanted to specialize in the cultural history of sixteenth-century Italy and France, and spent time in Rome on several occasions taking courses and doing archival research. Noticing to what extent French travelers who visited Italy used inherited commonplaces (topos), rather than relied on their own perceptions and judgments, was a discovery, which influenced my future work with media. For me the notion 'new media' is an oxymoron, an empty slogan. Of course, technology develops. Gadgets are introduced and put into uses that seem 'new', but the invisible 'hand of the past' cannot be avoided. Media culture repeats ancient ideas and commonplaces as it moves forward. The past plays a guiding and sometimes a determining role.

The first virtual reality craze that happened around 1990 was an important stimulus for my work on media archaeology. I was traveling intensively giving lectures,

so I had many chances to dive into 'cyberspace' with the latest head-mounted displays and data gloves. I was fascinated, but also asked: was 'total immersion' really something new and unprecedented? By exploring the histories of the panorama and the stereoscope, as well as early manifestations of interactivity in machine culture, I noticed that VR was really a reactivation of a topos, a commonplace that had already appeared many times. While researching these issues I read theorists like Michel Foucault, Jonathan Crary, and Friedrich Kittler, but could not fully accept their ideas. Their programmatic, triumphal, and at time arrogant identification of sharp ruptures between 'epistemes' seemed suspect to me.

Model-making is all important, but I felt that models were forcibly superimposed on the past without marking them as such - as artificial constructs concocted by the theorist. Cultural history, my 'mother discipline', had its own 'rupture theorists' from Jacob Burckhardt to Arnold Toynbee, but it also emphasized the multilayered character of cultural processes and the gradual and asynchronous nature of historical change. Fernand Braudel made this very clear with his idea of different historical time scales (*durée*). Walter Benjamin, a great favorite of mine, also avoided positing abrupt changes, working simultaneously on all levels between the microscopic and the macroscopic. By the way, it is interesting to notice how Crary in his latest book *24/7* (2014) has backed off from the extreme rupturistic positions of his youth to support a more nuanced, gradual, and layered idea of cultural transitions.

Stating that 'rupture' itself is a topos may seem difficult to accept in the middle of the Covid-19 crisis. It is a fact that ruptures happen; they can be caused by viruses, natural catastrophes, wars, revolutions, stock-market crashes, etc. How total, sudden and permanent they are, that is the question. The idea of rupture has been internalized by cultural observers for thousands of years and used for millenarian prophesies and religious and political propaganda, so it works as a topos. My 'media archaeology as topos study' or 'topos archaeology' does not claim that topoi are all there is. There is a dynamic relationship between topoi as migrating discursive entities and material-social-economic aspects of culture.

In which ways do you think your approach differs from other media archaeologists such as Siegfried Zielinski, Jussi Parikka or Wolfgang Ernst?

Of these three figures, Zielinski is closest to my way of doing media archeology. I got to know Siegfried in 1990 and was inspired by his book *Audiovisionen* (1989). Media archaeology did not yet exist then. While going through my files, I recently discovered that in the Spring Semester of 1993 I taught a lecture course titled "An Archaeology of Audiovisions, or Introduction to Virtual Voyaging" at the University of Turku. The title shows that I was influenced by Zielinski, although I added my own emphases, ideas, and themes. To mention a curious detail I retrieved from the archives of oblivion, in the unpublished manuscript for this lecture series I already used the concept "Deep Time of Audiovisuality," which I traced to the nineteenth century. A decade later it was (independently) popularized as a now well-known slogan by Zielinski in his book *Deep Time of the Media*.

1994 had key importance for media archaeology. It was in that year when both Zielinski and me began publishing programmatic texts about our visions of media archaeology. My first book on it appeared in Finnish in 1996 as a companion volume to the television series "Archaeology of the Moving Image," which I wrote and directed for the Finnish television. I share with Zielinski a very broad curiosity toward things missing from the history books. We both are constantly trying to broaden their visions by uncovering neglected, suppressed and misrepresented aspects of the past. By associating them with the manifestations of contemporary media culture, the past and the present can be put into dialogues that will hopefully make them explain each other.

Siegfried's profile combines a trained 'media scientist', Romantic utopian, Goethe-type humanist, would-be alchemist, European avant-gardist, and a conceptual anarchist. He worships nonconformist 'heroes', whose profiles he wants to salvage from oblivion as models for alternate futures. In *Deep Time of the Media* he even claims that the book was "written in a spirit of praise and commendation, not of critique." I have no heroes. My works are written in the 'spirit' of critique, not of 'praise'. The importance of individuals as agents of culture is limited. They operate within broader waves, movements, and formations. I like to think that my work is related with what Sigfried Giedion called (with words borrowed from his teacher Heinrich Wölfflin) 'anonymous history'.

Although my educational background is much like Wolfgang Ernst's, our ideas of media archaeology are miles apart. His 'radical' media archaeology eschews the discursive dimension and instead emphasizes the autonomous agency of devices

like sound recorders. Where Zielinski's writings are full of warmth and passion, Ernst's work is deliberately cold and distanced. The fact that recording devices produce traces is more important for Wolfgang than the meanings of these traces. Wolfgang tries to formalize the media archaeological method to an extreme (even provocatively comparing it to mathematics) and marginalizes the role of the human being (although he is one, and very talented). I see an epistemological problem in Ernst's work: machines themselves may be 'media archaeologists' as he claims, but we can only access their operations - and know they exist - through cultural signs and discourses, and the subjectivity of the observer.

Jussi's work is again something different, as are its influences. His professor at the University of Turku (we come from the same school, although I am a generation older), Jukka Sihvonen, was a Deleuze enthusiast and infected Jussi. As a Deleuzian media archaeologist Jussi is a rare bird, but his work has also been influenced by other sources, like Kittler, Ernst, and the German 'school' of *Kulturtechniken* research. He keeps adding new features from natural sciences, ecological thinking, anthropocene criticism, digital data theory, etc. The outcome is an unstable mix of theory, which appeals to scholars of his generation and younger. It has little to do with humanism, semiotics, and painstaking discourse-oriented archival research like mine. Jussi has innovative ideas, but I don't think he does much of what I would characterize as media archaeological fieldwork.

Would you define yourself as a 'humanist'? What does it mean to you to be a humanist? Which aspects of the "new materialisms" in philosophy and anthropology would you consider appealing or productive for media studies?

I received a humanistic education (in the European tradition), so obviously it made me a 'humanist'. A list of some of the scholars, intellectuals, and authors (I don't draw sharp lines between 'types'), who influenced me easily demonstrates this: Michel de Montaigne, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, Franz Kafka, Jacob Burckhardt, Fernand Braudel, Johan Huizinga, Mikhail Bakhtin, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Cassirer, Aby Warburg, Ernst Panofsky, Ernst Robert Curtius, Erich Auerbach, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Carlo Ginzburg, Marshall McLuhan, Jean-Luc Godard. I identified myself with the quote from Terence, *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto* ("I am human and nothing human is alien to me"), Montaigne had carved on a wooden beam in his study.

I still appreciate the works of these formidable figures, but I see now how narrow and biased the list is. It only includes privileged white Caucasians males (all except McLuhan are Europeans, and even McLuhan was educated in Europe). I thought of including the name of Foucault, whose archaeology of knowledge influenced me, but he would not fit in. Although humanism was never as homogeneous as its opponents claim, it certainly put the human being —*a certain kind of human being*— in the center. Everything else was subordinated under *his* controlling gaze, purportedly 'for the good of mankind'. Humanism believed in the power of learning and education to make a better world. There was a lot of idealism and hope in it.

Foucault's archaeology of knowledge demonstrated that such notions had no universal validity. They were discursive constructs formed under certain circumstances under the aegis of the interplay of power and knowledge. His stance is often classified as antihumanism, because it attacked human self-importance, privilege, vanity, and greed, summarized by the famous words that closed *The Order of Things*: "As the archaeology of our thought easily [*sic*] shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end."

There are plenty of reasons for the ferocious attacks against Western humanism made by feminist posthumanists like Rosi Braidotti, as well as by postcolonial theorists, who have for decades been tearing apart the constructs used by Westerners to submit much of the world under their rule. 'Humanitarian' goals have served as a pretext for exploitation. The Anthropocene debate has raised voices blaming humanism for the global environmental crisis, because it endorsed the misguided doctrine of the Idea of Progress. However, such accusations should be qualified. Humanists like Erasmus of Rotterdam satirized human stupidity, not excluding themselves. Humanist voices warned about the excesses of industrial capitalism and the results of brutal power politics that led to segregation and genocides.

There are many paradoxes and controversies related with humanism. Accusers like Braidotti have a point, but the edge of their arguments is blunted by their failures to explore the history, variety, and inner contradictions of humanism(s). They could learn something from media archaeological excavations and their resistance of simplistic black and white polarities. Unlike Braidotti seems to think (see *The Posthuman*, 2013), the entire Western humanism simply cannot be reduced to Leonardo da Vinci's drawing of the "Vitruvian Man," an iconic meme

on the internet. It is an a-historical travesty. Joseph Campana's and Scott Maisano's anthology *Renaissance Posthumanism* (2016) demonstrates that elements of 'posthumanism' already existed in the time of the Renaissance.

I still consider myself a humanist, although no longer in the naive idealistic sense of my student days. I don't endorse the right of *any* human being to dominate others, kill animals, or exploit nature. I don't support Western privilege to define the values and lifestyles of other cultures (something I learned at classes of cultural anthropology). The work of Edward Said has been an important guide. Said's theory of Orientalism was, as is well known, influenced by Foucault. It suggested that Westerners had invented 'the Orient' as a projection, justifying its Othering and exploitation. Although later scholars have nuanced Said's somewhat monolithic concept, its foundation still stands. It points out that discursive mechanisms are used as weapons in identity politics. It also applies to topoi. As a Palestinian intellectual working in the most prestigious academic institutions in the United States, Said found his own position somewhat problematic. In his final book *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2003) Said wrote something, which I consider very important: "I believed then, and still believe, that it is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism and that, schooled in its abuses by the experience of eurocentrism and empire, one could fashion a different kind of humanism that was cosmopolitan." In this sense I believe I can continue to call myself a humanist.

In your studies you reflect on literary representations of media. What role do you think literature plays in media archaeology? Do you think literary studies can make a meaningful contribution to media studies?

Discovering the work of the German literary scholar Ernst Robert Curtius and the area he founded, *Toposforschung* (topos study), was an important formative experience. It is therefore logical that I tried to figure out how textual discourses 'embodied' and carried forward meanings and ideas that had relevance as pointers to the formative developments of media culture. This is also why Foucault's discourse analysis became important to me. Simply put, it helped me to understand the crucial role the discursive dimension plays in the construction of social reality. To an extent I still believe that 'the lived' can only be grasped through signs as discourse. Wolfgang Ernst might disagree with me about this, although his work has been influenced by Foucault even more strongly than mine.

As I mentioned earlier, both my worldview and my stance as a researcher were influenced by semiotics, although I did not believe (and still don't believe) in its most extreme formalist-structuralist variants. Yet I think that we can only make sense of the world by reading signs. They are only comprehensible if we can relate them with codes, which are widely shared cultural agreements of all kinds. No two humans can possess exactly the same arrays of codes in their heads, because they are collected through continuous lifelong experience. Life therefore involves constant negotiations with signs about their meanings. As Stuart Hall explained, the same signs are read in many different ways depending on contextual factors like culture, gender, age, race, profession, ideological leanings, hobbies, etc.

The paradox with codes is that unless they are very simple, widely used, and institutionally enforced (like traffic lights), we cannot describe them exhaustively; we can only use them. Most codes that play roles in our daily communications are unstable and impossible to grasp. The English language does not exist anywhere as a totality; only in those countless enunciations where it is put into use. You could not change the situation, no matter how many dictionaries or grammars you would write or how often you would update them. Something would still escape your attention, because language is in flux and all human agents - researchers, writers and artists included - use it in idiosyncratic ways.

This may sound trivial and old-fashioned (I don't even talk about digital code here), but I mention it because it must have contributed to my interest in topoi. I treated topoi as semiotic signs. They began making sense when they resembled other signs (I speak about *topos manifestations*) or differed from them. The topoi I found from textual traditions offered possibilities to treat them symptomatically: to dig deeper toward the referents they pointed at, and to attempt to break out from the hermetic realm of the textual tradition. The work of Curtius was largely limited to what was happening inside the textual realm: the 'context' of a text was the company of other texts. Explaining *why* they appeared at certain moments interested him less. I found this limited and did not want to follow the same path.

I understood semiotics as a kind of cultural technique - a discursive toolset that helps us make sense of the overwhelming chaos around us, to give it form, and to help us penetrate beyond it. Searching for topoi functions in a somewhat similar way. A topos is less important than what it can reveal about things hidden behind it. Literary works are rich sources of topoi for understanding media culture. I understand that this may not interest those media archaeologists whose

main emphases are material(istic). However, there are signs of renewed interest in the discursive dimension of culture and symbolic forms. Cassirer is having a comeback. My work should have something to offer for that next wave.

More than by literary studies, my early work was influenced by cultural history. I have never concentrated solely on textual analysis. The material aspects of media culture are very important to me, as anyone who has read *Illusions in Motion* (2013) can see. I observe media culture as a layered, heterogeneous, and 'liquid' construct. My work proceeds on three levels, trying to link materialities with cultural practices, and with discursive activity. I don't see the relationships between these layers as mutually deterministic or one-directional. There are many contributing factors; what counts varies depending on the context.

In your work you use the concept of topoi as a key tool for research. Can topoi be discretely classified? How can you discern between two similar topoi? How are topoi more significant than memes, tropes or motifs?

I have always been against rigid classifications and categories. Culture is in flux and freezing its forms is a kind of violation. Because 'things are in motion', we cannot separate ourselves from their flow except in an instrumental (not in an ontological) sense. 'I' am part of what I am observing even when I consciously adopt the stance of a 'cool' professional scholar approaching my research material critically and methodologically. I cannot avoid it: I can only be aware of the situation, keep it explicit, and acknowledge its consequences the best I can. Perhaps this is what I got from poststructuralism as well as from New Historicism, which became influential while I was working toward my version of media archaeology.

I am reluctant to categorize or classify topoi, or even to define topos in a way that has 'universal' significance. It would be a myth. I don't believe in 'universals' in anything. That is why I cannot take Jungian archetypes seriously. The myths, legends, and 'primordial' motifs the Jungians have identified can be very ancient and widespread, but they are not eternal. Neither do I believe that they are part of the human psyche. I consider them as cultural constructs concocted by humans and modified by tradition, sometimes over very long periods of time. I understand that sometimes the migration of motifs is difficult to demonstrate, but I don't think the same ideas pop up here and there because of some shared psychic or genetic disposition. In that sense I am a firm culturalist.

When it comes to topoi, Curtius was also somewhat vague, suggesting that they could be (paraphrasing the musicologist Willibald Gurlitt) "typical themes, formulas, and phrases." In his theory of rhetoric, Quintilian defined topoi as 'storehouses of trains of thought' meant to facilitate a practical purpose - the composition of orations. They were stock phrases, pre-made arguments or intellectual themes the speaker could adopt to make a speech more effective and appealing. In subsequent centuries such commonplace elements became separated from rhetoric and continued 'living' in literary genres. Curtius also suggested that new topoi were constantly born. So topoi were 'elements' repeated over and over again in literary traditions in more or less recognizable ways. Rather than purely formal or stylistic, they were 'containers' for ideas - transmitters of discursive content.

Discovering Aby Warburg (who influenced Curtius) was a revelation. Warburg's focus was visual culture. He paid much more attention to *how* motifs and meanings were 'transported' across centuries. Like Curtius, he was interested in the influence of Classical Antiquity on the Western civilization, but his interests were broader and theoretically more original. His *Pathosformel* was purportedly the origin of Curtius's topos. By another concept, *Bilderfahrzeuge*, which can be translated as an 'image vehicle' or 'transporter', Warburg connected the problematic of migrating formulas with material culture, reminding that formulas always need a material support. A fresco or an equestrian statue are tied to a single location as unique artifacts. A printed image on a separate sheet, an illustrated book or a magazine are different because they can be carried around and multiplied easily.

This is an important issue Curtius largely neglected. In contemporary media culture there are multitudes of distribution channels and material forms that carry topoi. A topos can be manifested in films, machine architecture, interface design, the navigational features or characters of videogames, in record cover designs, advertisements, graffiti, tattoos, and countless other places. Locating all the variants of a certain topos is a daunting task. Internet search engines can help, but there is no foolproof way of finding everything. Chance discoveries happen, and I often profit from them. It is important to keep the eyes and the ears open - topoi can loom anywhere. Like Pokémons, they have to be captured when encountered and then integrated into the slowly forming 'bigger picture'.

To summarize, a topos is a certain migrating idea, thought, or 'image' which is repeated so many times that it becomes a commonplace or cliché. It is given

new interpretations and its elements are modified, shuffled, and 'collaged' with other topoi. When it comes to 'memes, tropes or motifs', the borderlines are never absolutely clear, because these and other notions (such as *Pathosformel*, scheme, metaphor, symbol, etc.) are used within different conceptual systems that may not be compatible with each other. I guess we can say a topos is a repeated 'motif' encapsulated in 'vehicle' that allows it to survive and be transported in time and space. A topos can also manifest itself as a metaphor, etc.

I try to stay away from the notion 'meme' introduced by Richard Dawkins and applied by memetics. The analogy between 'gene pools' and 'meme pools' is overly schematic to me. The qualities of successful gene replicators are, according to Dawkins, longevity, fecundity and copying-fidelity, but none of them applies to culture in an unequivocal way. A successful cultural motif can be short-lived, long-lived or cyclically revived. The success depends on *contextual* factors rather than on 'blind' competition between memes. Many cultural forms proliferate by imitation, but 'copying fidelity' is not always a dominant feature. It may apply to pirated Louis Vuitton bags, smartphone clones or illegally copied computer software, but most cultural creativity is based on variations and modifications that are whimsical and unexpected - 'infidel'. Taste, serendipity and cultural conjectures all matter.

When it comes to memetics, it has failed to apply its theories to produce convincing empirical research or even to decide what exactly constitutes the meme as a unit of analysis. Tracing the migration paths of the song *Auld Lang Syne* (Dawkins's favorite example) does not require any genetic analogies. It makes more sense to trace and conceptualize it as a topos. Neither the external (meme as a perceivable object, a sign) nor internal (meme as a figment in the brain) definitions have been convincing. The concept has remained both too general and too vague to shed truly new light on particular examples in the case studies.

The most fundamental problem was inherent in Dawkins's original proposal. Rather than resorting to cultural and social sciences, he tried to analyze culture with the methods and concepts of unrelated fields - evolutionary biology, genetics, cognitive science and neuroscience. Therefore he missed grasping the layered, cunning, imprecise and 'erratic' qualities of cultural processes as well as their 'messy' semantic and discursive aspects. On discursive battlefields, there are rarely any clear winners or 'successful memes'. Culture is a concert of cacophonic voices, where moments of harmony are rare and momentary.

What I am *very* interested in are 'internet memes'. Except for the word 'meme' they have little to do with Dawkins. In a way they are stripped down to 'memetic things', which have become important in online 'traffic' and communication. What I am trying to figure out is their relationship with topoi. There are certain similarities, particularly when we look at well-known forms like 'image macro memes'. Everything has been enormously speeded up. Transmissions and transformations that took centuries now take minutes or seconds. Are we talking about the same thing or something different? I am not yet sure.

How does your concept topos relate to the problem of ideology? Is ideology still a relevant idea for media analysis? Do you think media archaeology can help us to understand post-truth politics, fake news or the use of big data?

As I said, a topos functions as a mobile container - a 'vehicle' or 'vessel' - for content. Ernst once wrote to me about his interest in *non-cultural topoi*, which does not make any sense to me. For me a topos can never be a pure form, like a repeated feature of style. According to Ernst, his media-archaeological approach "privileges a form-based method of ordering images (as known from the work of the controversial art historian Heinrich Wölfflin)." Ernst is interested in creating an automatic online image retrieval system, which could associate visual images in big data without recourse to textual metadata. If the system worked it could be an interesting research tool, but we should be careful to keep it away from the hands of governmental and corporate agents, who would be all too willing to use it for surveillance, enemy profiling, marketing, etc. (I bet they already have such systems up and running).

Pure formalism has only instrumental value for me. Ernst's system would have limited importance for the kind of topos archaeology I practice. Of course, it could reveal useful raw material, and perhaps allow us to create 'topos cartographies'. In that sense, it would work as an 'automated archaeologist', which is the promising part. However, such searches would only do part of the task. They would provide little information about the 'deeper meanings' and specific contexts of the images. For similar reasons I have doubts about Lev Manovich's 'cultural analytics'. Algorithmic analysis of big data reveals visual patterns and regularities, but its potential for explaining deeper and more specific semantic determinants and meanings is limited. As far as I see, they can only be figured out by human brainpower.

When it comes to ideology, topoi offer themselves for persuasive goals like advertising and political propaganda. We see a link here with their origins in the theory of rhetoric. They can be effective and dangerous, because they appear in many different guises. The cultural historian Peter Burke wrote something that applies to this aspect of topoi: "The facade of tradition may mask innovation." He also reversed it: "Apparent innovation may mask the persistence of tradition." For me this is exactly how topoi function. They thrive in the masquerade of culture, appearing in attractive outfits but hiding agendas behind their masks. Some of the agendas are benign or simply silly, while others are inimical and sinister.

Topoi carry fragments of ideology, but we have to ask how solid, coherent or fragmentary those ideologies may be. Perhaps they only survive in those fragments? These are of course issues Foucault was dealing with. By replacing episteme with *dispositif* in his late work he acknowledged the complexity and messiness of discursive environments, the difficulty of grasping them *in toto*, and their inherent incoherence. Foucault's last works offer great ways to reflect on today's online culture from the perspective of (non/post)ideology. This question is particularly pertinent when we think about internet memes and all the (apparent) pranks and pastiches circulating online. If they are fragments of ideology, we must ask where is the ideology and who sustains, influences, and/or undermines it.

Anyone can make a 'funny' meme by appropriating an image of Napoleon without any idea about who Napoleon was, when he lived and what he stood for. The recognizable figure is enough. To what extent can we relate such memes with the long tradition of Napoleon-inspired topoi like political caricatures? It is tempting to conclude that we have encountered an empty vessel. The contents have been thrown overboard during the 'trip' and never replaced. Yet there are also memes that knowingly modify and comment on age-old motifs. That happens when Donald Trump is depicted as Napoleon Bonaparte. The ideological stance may not be deep, but the satire has at least some perspective; it tries to say something.

I have spent an enormous amount of time tracing topoi, but not just for the fun of intellectual puzzle solving. The aim, which reveals my iconoclastic avant-garde stance, is to break their spell. The task may seem hopeless, but semiotics can help. Media archaeology as topos study helps observers to recognize topoi for what they are and reveal hidden agendas and ideological positions they embody. It is an approach for enhanced cultural perception with political consequences (in a broad philosophical sense). Topoi are used to limit and manipulate our lives. We

can never fully get rid of them because the power of tradition is so overwhelming, but we can adopt an active stance, for example by using topoi in the spirit of the Situationist *détournement* to device counter-strategies. Developing a 'topos awareness' is the first step. Taking control of topoi means taking control of our own lives.