Variations on Media Thinking by Siegfried Zielinski (review)

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Siegfried Zielinski. *Variations on Media Thinking.* **Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2019. 426 pp.**

Siegfried Zielinski's *Variations on Media Thinking* provides a historically capacious introduction to the work of one of today's most important theorists of media and media archaeology. Perhaps best known in the English-speaking world for developing the concept of deep time of the media in a 2006 translated book of the same name, *Variations on Media Thinking* continues Zielinski's lifelong project of theorizing media as "generators of surprise," which, for him, is the "epistemic goal of a *cultura experimentalis*" (xvii). As a collection of eighteen essays—with the oldest written nearly forty-five years ago—Zielinski's book is an illuminating exercise in all kinds of experimentation, understood here in the broadest possible scientific sense—intellectual, methodological, theoretical, and historical. Motivated by a "deep mistrust of history, or rather historiography" (37), Zielinski's genealogical method for exploring technical artifacts floats seamlessly between the particular and the abstract, the artifactual and the theoretical. From a cultural critique of the NBC series *Holocaust* broadcast to West Germans in 1979, to an exploration of the "symbolic machines" of thirteenth-century Catalan philosopher Ramon Llull, and to a manifesto on "The Art of Design," among other phenomena, *Variations on Media Thinking* experiments with trans-temporal/and -cultural approaches to thinking with, through, and of inhuman media apparatuses.

What makes Zielinski's work so valuable for those interested in media archaeology and theory is that it provides a genealogical prehistory of the present. Drawing on rich historical examples, *Variations on Media Thinking* shows how perceptual experience, or "envisioning" as Zielinski puts it, is inextricably tied to technical apparatuses. Such a commitment to genealogy opens the doors for project-based experimentation by "enabl[ing] us to understand developments as labyrinthine, as movements associated with digressions and impasses..." (xv). "Project" and "experiment" are conceptually indispensable for understanding Zielinski's body of work. The essays collected in *Variations on Media Thinking* demonstrate that Zielinski is a project-based thinker in two important senses: the first is quite literal, as many of his historical inquiries are collaboratively-written excursions into new artifactual archives (such as the chapter on the optical discoveries of Arab scientist Ibn al-Haytham [965-1040]); the second is more subtle, and has to do with the fact that Zielinski's methodological penchant for the project is a philosophical one too. Channeling Vilém Flusser, Zielinski declares "We do not need a new ontology, neither subject nor object oriented, to play together, critically and productively, with the things, facts, and circumstances, the words and concepts, that have to do with media or that are constituted and produced through media" (xvi).

Neither subjects nor objects, then, but *pro*-jects, critical and posthuman interrogators and creators of trans-historical (an)archaeological media phenomena—experimenters, above all, with change, flux, and variance. As a

*pro*ject, Zielinski's notion of media thinking embraces being thrown forward into more complex and chaotic relations with technical media, throwing off along the way all notions of cause/effect and subject/object. In the spirit of Giedion's "anonymous history" of mechanization or Stiegler's "epiphylogenesis" thesis, *Variations on Media Thinking* has no interest in sentimentalized subjective histories or object-oriented show-and-tell case studies. Instead, Zielinski experiments with a kind of inhuman (an)archaeology of media. Without falling into subject/object models of historical inquiry, Zielinski's hypothesis is that we consider the historically-situated processes of subject formation to be co-constitutive with developments in technical media. In order to better understand not only our own inhuman condition but how media apparatuses that structure our perception of the world (aesthetics/art, in other words) are situated within anarchic and chaotic relations of historical movement and contingent cultural techniques, Zielinski proposes a method of inquiry he calls "variantology." Variantology "has to do with compounds or mixtures of a kind whose unmixing always remains within the realm of imagination," since "the *variant* is more interesting in methodological and epistemological respects, as a mode of lightness and movement" (xx). With a nod to Glissant, variantology in Zielinski's formulation is a "unique poetics of relations" (ibid.). Or rather, as Zielinski puts it:

> In my view, what we need is a language (of text, images, sounds, and their connections) that does not conceal the technical and political/cultural character of artifacts, systems of artifacts, and the structures of extended telecommunication in the wider sense but that exposes it, evokes it, and refers to it when it is being used. Discontinuity, dynamics, switches, contacts, drivers, energies, interruptions, power, distribution—the potential in relations is as rich as the technical and political/cultural domain itself. (53-4)

To my mind, the idea of a poetic archaeology of inhuman media apparatuses whose anarchic relations are inseparable from the development of cultural techniques is one of Zielinski's most important provocations, as readers familiar with his *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (2006) and *[…After the Media]: News from the Slow-Fading Twentieth Century* (2013) can attest. Part two of the book, titled "Particular Archaeologies," should be of particular interest to readers familiar with Zielinski's penchant for the case study.

"Provocations," however, is also the name of the first, and arguably most important, section of the book. The eight essays gathered in this section provide the clearest articulation yet of Zielinski's lifelong commitment to experimental media thinking. What makes Zielinski's conception of media thinking so provocative, I think, is that it is simultaneously philosophical, cultural-critical, systemic, and genealogical in scope while at the same refusing to choose one mode at the expense of the others. As entry #52 in the University of Minnesota Press' "Posthumanities" series, *Variations on Media*

Thinking's main provocation is that it asks us to consider the intellectual call—the *vocation,* if you want be etymological about it—of the post- or inhuman that lurks perpetually behind culture and its media apparatuses. Zielinski's media thinking, in other words, is provocative in the sense that it wants us to be called forward by inhuman apparatuses—*pro*voked—into different modes of thought that are not afraid to engage deeply with "elaborate media technology" (41). The provocation, ultimately, is that for Zielinski, "*within* the arts and *within* the study of the arts," aesthetic practice/art has to "cross the boundary into science, into the domains of engineering and informatics, to prepare itself for the role as a special playground in the network of symbolic actions" (38, 41). Embracing such a provocation is an important choice for Zielinski because it creates "a decision for possibility," which "is better than a pragmatic preference for reality" (93). Thinking experimentally about media gives us the tools "to exist online and to live offline. Otherwise, we will simply become interchangeable functionaries of the world we ourselves have created. We must not hand that victory over to cybernetics" (95).

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Michelle Chiang. *Beckett's Intuitive Spectator: Me to Play.* **New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 196 pp.**

An important contribution to the New Interpretations of Beckett in the Twenty-First Century series, Michelle Chiang's study brings to the forefront the experience of the common spectator of Beckett's work. By reframing the experience of Beckett from the expert, scholarly perspective to the common reader and viewer, Chiang breathes fresh life into how we characterize the public reception of Beckett. Although Chiang brings a range of theory to her analysis of Beckett—from Deleuze to Bergson—she remains grounded in her concern with the common spectator and even frames her study in her early personal encounters with Beckett's work. As Beckett experimented with popular mediums such as radio, film, and television, it makes sense to question how a nonacademic public might receive his work. Chiang covers each of these mediums, as well as Beckett's staged plays, to trace a pattern of what she calls "an intuition of loss, where 'loss' is twofold in terms of 'the loss of meaning' and 'being at a loss'" (1). Beckett's art, Chiang reveals, pushes us out of our habitual ways of perceiving and moves us into an intuitive nonintellectual experience. The tension between these two modes of habitual and intuitive being is what constitutes the feeling of loss for Beckett's spectator (10-11).

After refining and connecting her concepts of habit, intuition and loss, Chiang devotes each subsequent chapter to Beckett's work within a specific medium. Her chapter on Beckett's radio plays, which covers *All That Fall,*