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# An Intermedial Cabinet of Obscurities

## Media-Archaeological Excavations in Performance

### Abstract

This article frames the essay-cluster *Theatre, Media, and the Archaeology of Spectacle* as an “intermedial cabinet of obscurities” and argues that media archaeology, paired with intermedial performance studies, enables theatre history to be rewritten as relational micro-histories rather than as a single developmental line. Drawing on Huhtamo’s genealogy of cultural topoi, Zielinski’s variantology, and Elsaesser’s fragments as epistemological probes, this text shows how the journal has long hosted archaeological gestures: studies of fireworks, moving panoramas, mechanical theatres, paper theatres, puppetry, and Raszewski’s reading of early peep-show boxes via Furttenbach. Methodologically, the article combines close readings of these interventions with an account of perceptual dispositives informed by Crary’s claim that vision is historically organized through shifting assemblages.

## Keywords

media archaeology, intermediality, performance studies

## Abstrakt

### Intermedialny gabinet osobliwości: Archeologia mediów w sztukach performatywnych

Artykuł wprowadza do bloku tekstów *Theatre, Media, and the Archaeology of Spectacle* jako „intermedialnego gabinetu osobliwości” i wskazuje, że archeologia mediów, zestawiona z intermedialnymi badaniami performansu, pozwala rewidować historię teatru jako sieć relacyjnych mikrohistorii, a nie jako jedną linię rozwojową. Odwołując się do genealogii toposów kulturowych Erkkiego Huhtamo, wariantologii Siegfrieda Zielinskiego oraz koncepcji Thomasa Elsaessera prób epistemologicznych historii mediów, tekst pokazuje, że czasopismo od dawna było miejscem gestów archeologicznych: studiów nad fajerwerkami, panoramami ruchomymi, teatrami mechanicznymi, teatrami papierowymi, lalkarstwem, a także interpretacji Raszewskiego wczesnych *peep-show boxes* poprzez lekturę Furttenbacha. Badacz łączy *close reading* tych interwencji z opisem dyspozytywów percepcji, opartym na tezie Jonathana Crary’ego, że widzenie jest historycznie organizowane przez zmienne układy.

## Słowa kluczowe

archeologia mediów, intermedialność, performatyka

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The history of *Pamiętnik Teatralny* shows that the journal has long combined theoretical inquiry with archaeological gestures that have uncovered forgotten histories of spectacle and reinserted them into new contexts. Among them we find twentieth-century attempts to describe intermedial and popular phenomena of the culture of attractions, combining aesthetic and technical perspectives in the analysis of visual transformations. Examples include studies of fireworks,<sup>1</sup> the use of moving panoramas in the scenography of Antoni Sacchetti,<sup>2</sup> mechanical theatres,<sup>3</sup> paper theatres,<sup>4</sup> and even entire issues devoted to historical puppet theatres.<sup>5</sup> It is worth recalling that between 1962 and 1992 the journal's editor-in-chief was Zbigniew Raszewski, who explored the stage as part of broader transformations in visual culture. He expressed this most fully in his analysis of early peep-show boxes, interpreted through the writings of Joseph Furttenschach.<sup>6</sup>

In recent decades, performance studies scholarship has increasingly called for research into such themes, in search of alternative genealogies of media cultures.<sup>7</sup> Popular entertainments, optical shows, and the attractions of cities can be used to examine long-term transformations of media cultures by tracing shifts in the organization of perception. Jonathan Crary argues that visuality should not be treated as a stable faculty but located within historically variable conditions—what he calls “the functioning of a collective assemblage of disparate parts on a single social surface.”<sup>8</sup> In that sense, the nineteenth century can be understood as a period that put to the test the idea that “Vision and its

<sup>1</sup> Piotr Mitzner, “Fajerwerki,” *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 32, no. 1 (1983): 59–79.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Król-Kaczorowska, “Antoni Sacchetti – dekorator romantyczny: Działalność w latach 1829–1845,” *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 8, no. 1/3 (1959): 219–261; “Antoni Sacchetti - dekorator romantyczny: Działalność w latach 1846–1870,” *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 16, no. 2 (1967): 231–251.

<sup>3</sup> Marek Waszkiel, “Teatry mechaniczne w Warszawie w latach 1795–1847,” *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 26, no. 1 (1977): 69–92; “Kinematograficzny teatr Kuparenki,” *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 45, no. 1/2 (1996): 88–117.

<sup>4</sup> Janina Wiercińska, “Papierowy świat teatru,” *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 42, no. 1/2 (1993): 97–126.

<sup>5</sup> *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 36, no. 1/2 (1987).

<sup>6</sup> As Raszewski notes, the term “peep-show box” refers to a stage form derived from the seventeenth-century *Guckkasten* (Pol. *scena pudełkowa*, Ger. *Guckkastenbühne*)—literally a “looking box,” a popular fairground device through which spectators viewed painted scenes via a lens. In his introduction to Joseph Furttenschach's *O budowie teatrów* (On the Construction of Theatres), Raszewski emphasizes that the Polish term does not fully convey the cultural connotations of the German original, which directly evokes this optical attraction. See Zbigniew Raszewski, “Introduction,” in Joseph Furttenschach, *O budowie teatrów*, 2nd ed. (Gdańsk: słowa/obraz terytoria, 2009), 5–7.

<sup>7</sup> See Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), doi:10.7551/mitpress/9228.001.0001; Nele Wynants, ed., *Media Archaeology and Intermedial Performance: Deep Time of the Theatre* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Kara Reilly, ed., *Theatre, Performance and Analogue Technology: Historical Interfaces and Intermedialities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137319678>.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), 6.

effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject.”<sup>9</sup> The author of *Techniques of the Observer* adds, “There is no observing subject prior to this continually shifting field.”<sup>10</sup> According to Crary, “There never was or will be a self-present beholder to whom a world is transparently evident.”<sup>11</sup> Taken together, these claims allow us to study sites where vision is produced as a cultural technique rather than merely expressed. If the observing subject is co-produced by a shifting field of practices and devices, then media forms are likewise best approached as relational and historically entangled. As Crary notes, “any single medium or form of visual representation no longer has a significant autonomous identity.”<sup>12</sup> For the purposes of this essay-cluster, that claim invites a careful return to panoramas, mechanical stages, phantasmagorias, and other hybrid formats—approached as sites in which the *longue durée* of visual culture can be traced.

Contemporary discourse on the intermedial contexts of performance seems to draw less sharply defined temporal boundaries than it did at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. The works I have referred to so far, as well as this issue, suggest that the outcomes of turn-of-the-century research on intermedial performance and artists’ experiments with new media on the stage—variously understood—need not delimit inquiry to this subfield. Earlier forms of spectacle, approached through a media-archaeological lens, can be read more analytically in light of contemporary transformations of visibility and performativity.

The texts published in *Pamiętnik Teatralny* in the second half of the twentieth century may not have aspired to establish a new research paradigm—one situated between intermedial performance studies and media archaeology, and yet, from today’s perspective, they read as pioneering attempts to bring overlooked artifacts into the discourse on performance history. Mechanical stages, moving panoramas, and other waning popular forms did not sit comfortably within canonical narratives of the national theatre, nor within celebratory accounts of the modernist avant-garde. Nevertheless, they found a place in *Pamiętnik Teatralny*.

This essay-cluster can be read as a gesture that joins the search for forgotten intermedialities of performance. As the preceding conference demonstrated, such inquiries can be pursued genealogically—from the Renaissance to the

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<sup>9</sup> Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Crary, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Crary.

<sup>12</sup> Crary, 23.

present day.<sup>13</sup> A renewed focus on optical shows, conjuring acts, fairground attractions, and mechanical puppeteers from before the mid-twentieth century provides a valuable foundation for rethinking visual culture across the *longue durée*.

In contemporary humanities scholarship, this perspective has arguably found its most effective articulation in media archaeology, whose aim is to approach the notion of the “evolution of media technologies” in a variantological and critical manner by tracing convergences, abandoned trajectories, and the material and discursive traces of alternative possibilities. This is complemented by reflection on intermediality, understood as an attempt to grasp phenomena that operate through collisions and the erosion of boundaries between theatre, cinema, and mass spectacle. The performative and visual formats of the nineteenth-century fairground—where showmen freely borrowed conventions from one another—constitute a field of ongoing mutation rather than a closed catalogue; in this sense, their processual character is crucial.

The intersection of media-archaeological and intermedial perspectives that characterizes this issue enables us to ask how the objects examined here resonate today across the humanities, artistic practices, and cultural policy. In this sense, articles both continue earlier threads present in *Pamiętnik Teatralny* and deliberately reengages that tradition in light of current debates on media history, performance, and spectacle.

## Media Archaeology, Intermediality, and Performance Studies

Media archaeology, as Erkki Huhtamo argued in his essay *Media Studies as an ‘Archaeology’: Elements of Genealogy*,<sup>14</sup> assumes a genealogical approach that excavates cultural *topoi*—persistent motifs and dispositives<sup>15</sup>—by tracking their re-emergence across centuries and technologies. In *Illusions in*

<sup>13</sup> Inspiration for this essay-cluster derives from the international conference *The Culture of Attractions: Past and Present* (Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, September 13-14, 2025).

<sup>14</sup> Erkki Huhtamo, “Media Studies as an ‘Archaeology’: Elements of Genealogy,” *Early Popular Visual Culture* 18, no. 4 (2020): 340–367, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17460654.2021.2016198>

<sup>15</sup> There is an ongoing debate about whether the term should be spelled as “dispositive” or “dispositif.” In this article I use the form “dispositive”; see Maria Tortajada and François Albéra, eds., *Cine-Dispositives: Essays in Epistemology Across Media* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015). The choice emphasizes the category’s function in Anglophone media studies as a dynamic model comprising multiple layers: the internal mechanisms of a medium, its material apparatus, its external consequences, and its entanglement with power, knowledge, and representation. In this sense, dispositive analysis offers a critical framework for understanding how media practices shape cultural beliefs and negotiate social norms.

*Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles*,<sup>16</sup> Huhtamo showed that nineteenth-century moving panoramas were material articulations of the collective imagination: persistent fantasies of mobility, travel, and technological progress embodied in ephemeral spectacles. Such analyses demonstrate how media archaeology unsettles inherited hierarchies, revealing that what once appeared marginal or obsolete may in fact have been structurally central. From panoramas and dioramas to mechanical theatres, media archaeology reminds us that cultural history has not unfolded in a straight line: blind alleys and abandoned experiments were as formative as the later triumphs of mass media.

This critique of teleology is central to media-archaeological inquiry. In *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*,<sup>17</sup> Siegfried Zielinski argued that media should not be understood as steps in a predetermined evolution, but as contingent articulations shaped by heterogeneous forces. He envisioned media history as a labyrinth of divergent paths in which experiments proliferate, overlap, and often fail—without converging on a single technological destiny. Television was not prefigured by eighteenth-century optical toys, nor was the gramophone the inevitable heir to the phonograph. It is precisely this field of contingency that media archaeology seeks to recover. Within it, communication technologies emerge from specific choices, exclusions, and material negotiations, rather than from any inexorable mechanism of progress.

Thomas Elsaesser likewise challenged teleological models of media history, and his perspective is crucial for understanding media archaeology as a critical practice.<sup>18</sup> For Elsaesser, media archaeology could not be reduced to antiquarian recovery—the cataloguing of forgotten devices or exotic prehistories of cinema. Such exercises, however stimulating, risk reproducing the very linearity they claim to contest. The value of media archaeology, Elsaesser insisted, lies in treating fragments of the past as epistemological probes: as questions about practices of vision, memory, and imagination that resist closure. Drawing on Jonathan Crary, he emphasized that the nineteenth century was saturated with competing dispositives of perception and display. To treat the magic lantern merely as “cinema’s precursor” is therefore to blur, rather than clarify, media history. It

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<sup>16</sup> Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion*.

<sup>17</sup> Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, trans. Gloria Custance (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), doi:10.1515/9789048529964.

belonged to an alternative set of visual regimes, alongside devices such as the stereoscope, the panorama, and the phantasmagoria. These dispositives were marginalized by the institutional triumph of cinema, but never fully erased; they were suspended, awaiting reactivation. From this vantage point, media archaeology enables a variantological narration that works against progressivist accounts by mapping discontinuities. It traces why certain practices were canonized while others were displaced and shows how their latent logics may resurface within later media cultures.

Though writing in different registers, Huhtamo, Zielinski, and Elsaesser share a common aim: to dismantle the “grand narratives” that portray media as a seamless chain of inventions culminating in an inevitable present. In this sense, media archaeology can function as a critical instrument for studying the material foundations of visual and performative culture. At its core, it returns to matter—to apparatus, costume, screen, and mechanism—and treats these material elements as active agents in cultural history.

Performance studies have long recognized that materiality and mediality are integral to the performing arts. Scholars in this field use concepts such as performativity, mediality, and intermediality to theorize how technologies and bodies co-constitute live performance. Media archaeology adds a critical historical layer to this perspective. Huhtamo’s revision of Jonathan Crary’s account, for instance, shows that nineteenth-century panoramas, dioramas, and mechanical theatres were spectacles that organized perception, structured attention, and produced collective experience. More broadly, what we now call digital, post-digital, or intermedial performance may have hidden genealogies in panoramas, phantasmagorias, automata, and other forgotten sites where art, science, and technology once converged. Such insights have begun to reshape research on intermedial performance.<sup>19</sup>

Taken together, media archaeology and performance studies offer a methodological framework that can interrogate the structure of history itself. They replace teleology with plurality, presenting theatre and media history as overlapping micro-histories rather than a single line of progress. Yet one question traverses both fields: how does the materiality of performance—from costume and machine to projection and screen—shape spectatorship and generate forms of collectivity?

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<sup>19</sup> See in English Nele Wynants, *Media Archaeology and Intermedial Performance*, Reilly, *Theatre, Performance and Analogue Technology*. In Polish Jakub Kłeczek, *Performans cyfrowy – historycznomedialne przemiany* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2022), Artur Duda, *Performans na żywo: Jako medium i obiekt mediatyzacji* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2011).

## This Essay-Cluster as a Cabinet of Curiosities: Machines, Bodies, Media, and Stage

The contributions in this issue open a series of intermedial inquiries that resonate with the perspectives outlined above. Read together, they resemble a walk through a cabinet of curiosities: each artifact—whether a machine, a gesture, or a medium—calls for sustained attention and recalibrates the comparative frame. The volume works as a curated sequence of encounters: a theatregraph, a panorama, the afterimage of a showman's trick, the imprint of a political icon. What connects these materials is less the similarity of their objects than the questions they provoke when placed side by side—questions of illusion, memory, and embodiment that continue to sustain performance.

The first article, by David Drozd, examines Emil František Burian's theatregraph—an avant-garde scenic practice that combined film and photographic projection with live performance and music. Drozd reads the theatregraph as a site of tension between avant-garde stage practice and the mass media of the interwar period. Burian's experiments register as ruptural configurations: confrontations of mediality and materiality, of voice-band and projection, of fragment and whole—configurations that unsettle traditional dramatic structure. Drozd situates this work within the analytical avant-garde—idiosyncratic, dissonant, and fragmentary—while also acknowledging its anticipation of postdramatic practices. These experiments complicate linear genealogies of progress. They are legible as an archaeology of fractures, in which theatre operates as a machine for staging utopian tensions and testing experimental collisions.

The early twentieth-century avant-garde unfolded in parallel with the rise of mass media, increasingly treating them as conditions of artistic practice rather than external additions to it. Fascination with novelty, speed, and mass (city—mass—machine) shaped manifestos and circulated through newspapers, cinematic experiments, and theatrical scenographies, turning these arenas into laboratories of new perception. For artists like Tadeusz Peiper, theatre appears as a communication machine designed to rival other media. In this context, the machine ceases to function as a neutral tool and becomes a partner capable of redefining plot, character, and action. As Paweł Stangret notes, this fascination with the mechanical also carries a modern understanding of subjectivity—relational, formed through intra-actions between humans and objects. In avant-garde discourse, the machine is framed both as disruption and as promise: a way of imagining a new theatre and a new media culture.

Marzenna Wiśniewska's contribution explores the entanglement of matter, visuality, and the body in performance. She examines how the logics of early

optical illusion are refracted through contemporary theatre practices, focusing on the work of the collective Manual Cinema. Here, “manual cinema” is reconstructed as a creative strategy in which lamp, puppet, and screen intertwine with the performer’s presence to form a hybrid spectacle. This becomes a kind of archaeology in practice: a return to shadows, slides, and analog projections as a deliberate search for an alternative stage language. Wiśniewska shows how older media, reactivated in this way, continue to generate new perceptual and performative experiences.

Barbara Pitak-Piaskowska’s article examines Phineas Taylor Barnum’s nineteenth-century museum of curiosities and the freak shows that accompanied it—spectacles built on the display of non-normative bodies. She asks how Barnum secured his position in popular entertainment through the rhetoric of “humbug”: spectacular mystifications that fused fabricated narratives, slogans, and theatrical staging. His enterprises can be read as an emblematic form of the capitalization of the body, where theatricalization and exploitation merge into a single mechanism of spectacle. Figures such as Joice Heth, Tom Thumb, and Zip the Pinhead appear less as individuals than as liminal constructs—simultaneously living persons and media fabrications—drawing audiences into a game of classification, fascination, and fear. Barnum emerges as a figure of mediality: the architect of a system in which press and stage converge into a cycle of sensation and publicity. The analysis of Barnum’s “spectacle of bodily otherness” thus opens a reflection on how nineteenth-century entertainment defined the boundaries of normativity—and how powerfully those mechanisms continue to reverberate in contemporary media practices.

Witold Mrozek’s contribution turns to the twenty-first century, focusing on how mass media intensify conflicts around sacred imagery. His article examines the controversies surrounding Jerzy Kalina’s *The Poisoned Spring* (2020) and Oliver Frljić’s *The Curse* (2017), both of which reveal how the figure of John Paul II operates at an unstable intersection of art, religion, law, and media. Each work uses a sculptural representation of the Pope—Kalina’s hyperrealistic figure hurling a stone in central Warsaw, and Frljić’s statue subjected to execution and sexual acts—as a catalyst for dispute and circulation. What links them is not only the papal image itself, but its movement across multiple registers: object of worship, theatrical prop, cultural icon, and viral meme. The difficulty of separating these functions fuels outrage, legal interventions, and media amplification. In this light, the papal statue operates simultaneously as representation and surrogate, activated in ritual, performance, or political spectacle. Mrozek shows that this instability extends more broadly to the sacred image in

contemporary culture, blurring the lines between monument and relic, secular commemoration and cultic presence.

These five essays do not form a single narrative or a linear history. They remain closer to a cabinet of curiosities, where machines and costumes, anomalous bodies, and images caught in circuits of media power stand side by side. Each contribution introduces a different object, figure, or problem; taken together, they converge on a shared question: how theatre relates to media, and how that relation endures and transforms over time.

It is this entanglement that forms the axis of the volume. The essays open a space where archive meets stage, and the media-archaeological perspective intersects with the performative. Across this range—from the Czech avant-garde to contemporary controversies over political performance—the history of theatre and media appears less as a finished account than as a process in motion: constantly revised, reframed, and reinscribed.

## Intermedial Performance in a Long-Term Perspective

This issue of *Pamiętnik Teatralny* keeps the discussion open by proposing several routes rather than a single map. It offers a constellation of fragments in which costumes and projections, anomalous bodies and political icons, obsolete techniques and contemporary reconstructions appear side by side. The contributions engage in dialogue—sometimes in counterpoint, sometimes in dissonance—forming a polyphony that multiplies questions rather than resolves them.

We thank the authors for participating in this experiment. Their texts expand the field of intermediality and media archaeology and demonstrate how diverse approaches can enter into relation with a media-archaeological perspective—sometimes by resonance, sometimes by friction. This also underscores that the history of theatre and performance is never complete: it is marked by fissures that invite reconstruction, contestation, and re-reading.

Rather than closing the conversation, these articles propose a series of productive juxtapositions: the Czech avant-garde alongside Barnum's freak show, manual cinema alongside papal performances, and accounts of machines alongside analyses of stage practices. Taken together, these traces cross and echo in ways that invite further inquiry.



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