Punk Archaeology, Slow Archaeology, and the Archaeology of Care

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Introduction

My paper today is yet another effort to come to terms with my anxiety about the emergence of a transhuman, digital archaeology. To be clear from the start, I consider myself a bit of a digital archaeology and a digital native. I can’t remember, for example, living in a house without a computer and my role on archaeological projects has always involved data management and GIS. Over the last few years, I’ve also started an open access press, The Digital Press at the University of North Dakota, that privileges digital downloads over print and has featured a number of open access books that critically examine digital practices in archaeology.

My interest today is speculative and theoretical and instead of focusing on a specific application of a transhuman field practice, I’d like to think about technology in archaeology in a more historical and expansive way. This will, of course, make many of my generalizations easy enough to dismiss with examples for actual field practices or implementation. These to me are reasons for optimism and perhaps reflect the advanced state of critical engagement with the way that digital tools are shaping the discipline. At the same time, I do think that long trajectory of digital practices in archaeology (and in our transhuman culture) remains unclear as folks like Jeremey Huggett have recognized (Huggett, Reilly, Lock 2018).

My efforts to engage in this conversation, which I shamelessly plug in the title of this paper, involved publishing a collection of reflections on “punk archaeology” (Caraher et al. 2014) and especially in a couple of short articles that use the popular “slow movement” as an imperfect, but nevertheless accessible and useful lens for critically engaging digital archaeology (Caraher 2015, 2016). Punk archaeology offered a view of archaeology grounded in radical and performative inclusivity, and slow archaeology considered the implications of a particular strand of scholarship that celebrated the increases in efficiency, accuracy, and precision associated with digital field practices. While both efforts have received substantive and thoughtful critiques that have demonstrated the limits to these analogies (archaeology is LIKE punk or LIKE the slow movement; see Richardson 2016; Graham 2017), I still hope that they offer some useful perspectives on the relationship between how archaeology produces the past in the present.

My interest today is to explore a to trace this thread of thinking from the history of the discipline and its roots in modern industrial practices to the adoption of digital tools, the emergence of new ways production into the realm of archaeological ontologies and to reflect on how digital practices complement new ways of producing archaeology knowledge and shaping disciplinary practices.
Two mid-century Christian anarchists, Ivan Illich and Jacques Ellul, who wrote critically on the rise of modern institutions and technology, offer a potentially useful point of departure for critiquing modernity and the use of modern technology in archaeological practice. Without over simplifying and eliding their different perspectives, both men saw the shift toward modern practices as profoundly disruptive to traditional values and a sense of community.

Ellul’s is perhaps the more intriguing for any consideration of archaeological practice. He suggested that the rise of rationality and technology and its distinctive form of “technique” severed the careful attention of the individual from work itself (Ellul 1964). In its place emerged practices which had their own abstract logic that, in the modern era, became closely tied to the need for efficiency. Thus, in Ellul’s writing, the emergence of modern technique marked the decline in human autonomy as individual choices in how to work gave way to the inescapable logic of efficiency as the organizing principle structuring all human relations and relationships between humans and their tools. As Jennifer Alexander noted in her historical study of efficiency, “efficiency remains an iconic mantra in the high-tech industries,” and I’d argue efficiency remains a key consideration for how archaeology is organized and uses tools (Alexander 2008). In fact, a recent conference and publication dedicated to digital tools in field work, Mobilizing the Past for a Digital Future, was lacked with discussions of efficiency and workflow in digital practices. Among the most widely cited and read articles from Journal of Field Archaeology is Christopher Roosevelt’s (and team) thorough presentation of the digital workflow from their project in southwest Turkey.

Ivan Illich shared many of Ellul’s concerns and proposed that modernity, technology, and the state disrupted the conviviality that existed in the premodern world and among premodern societies (Illich 1975). For Illich, conviviality represented the opposite of modern productivity (with its interest in speed and efficiency) and emphasized the free, unstructured, and creative interaction between individuals and between individuals and their environment. For Illich, like Ellul, the use of technology does not result in a society more free, but one that is increasingly bereft of the conditions that allow for creativity as the need for efficiency and speed create a kind of dominant logic in practice. (One can see in this tension, for example, the curiosity driven and open-ended nature of basic science in contrast to the narrower more practically focused work of applied science (Pickering 1995).)

Archaeology, of course, has always been a hybrid discipline with certain aspects of practice grounded in the world of craft and others in the world of industrial (and increasingly post-industrial) practice. Michael Shanks and others have shown that archaeology, “has never been modern” or at least entirely modern as it integrates industrial and pre-industrial practices (Shanks and Maguire 1995; Shanks 2012). Recent efforts to champion the use of digital tools within archaeology have tended, however, at least on the practical level, to celebrate their ability to improve the aspects of archaeological work that tend not to align with industrial paradigms such interpretative description, scientific illustration, and the careful study of excavated artifacts. This suggests to me that the quest to improve efficiency in archaeological practice extends equally to modern and pre-modern practices in the discipline.

Illich’s and Ellul’s critiques of technology fit only awkwardly with much recent scholarship, of course. Efficiency itself has become increasingly regarded as a problematic term deeply embedded in
practice and the coincidence of human and material agency (e.g. Shove 2017). Bruno Latour and others have demonstrated that any effort to unpack the complexity of energy in any system — social, mechanical, environmental, et c. — requires abstract acts of purification that define and separate energy and effects from their complex network of entangled relationships and practices (Latour 1993; Shove 2017, 7-8). This work, on the one hand, echoes recent studies of both ancient and modern technology that have challenged tradition views of agency and argued that objects and individuals co-create the world. This greater attention to the interaction between individuals and objects has provided a compelling theoretical framework for understanding the interplay of technology, tools, objects, and agency in the construction of archaeological knowledge.

On the other hand, this work has only just begun, I suspect, to inform the thriving conversation on the impact of digital tools on the organization of archaeological practice (although see Pickering 1995; Taylor et al. 2018), the nature of archaeological skills and expertise, and issues of archaeological preservation and publication (Huggett 2017). In fact, changing views of agency in the world have created new views of ethics in archaeological practice as well as in the social organization of discipline (e.g. Dawdy 2016). Perhaps this entangled view of the world gives the work of Illich and Ellul new relevance for archaeologist concerned with the social issue of disciplinary practice across the field.

**Transhumanism**

As the organizers of this panel know well, transhumanism offers a way to consider the interplay between technology and performance in society (e.g. Haraway 1984) and, more specifically, in archaeology. It also offers a vague roadmap to anticipate the social and disciplinary implications of new approaches to producing archaeological knowledge. Indeed, for most of the later 20th century archaeologists have embraced methodology and seen knowledge making as an explicit relationship between particular techniques, tools, and situations. In this way, archaeological work does not end at the limits of our bodies, but extends reciprocally through technology, techniques, and social organization to create the hybrid space of archaeological knowledge making.

Archaeological approaches to modernity and the contemporary world easily extend to critiques of the tools and techniques that we use to produce archaeological knowledge. For example, Rodney Harrison, in his proposal of an archaeology of the contemporary world and modernity, has suggested that survey archaeology could replace excavation as the dominant metaphor in archaeology and shift our attention to surface assemblages consisting of people, objects, tools, and techniques. For authors like Shannon Lee Dawdy, the awareness of how assemblages produce meaningful pasts involves more than simply dutiful documentation and analysis of archaeological work but also recognizing the relationship between field work, local knowledge, ritual activities, and various pre- and anti-modern ways of locating, narrating, and producing social value for artifacts (Dawdy 2016). For Olivier (2012), this speaks to the chaotic nature of time and memory from which the discipline of archaeological seeks to produce an order, but not the only possible, useful, or meaningful order. In this context, the rather linear practice of stratigraphic excavation with its institutional, disciplinary, and performative underpinnings gives way to the raucous and uneven performance of punk rock music which often eschews expertise, barriers to access, and specialized knowledge (see Gnecco 2013). There’s an immediacy to it and an explicitly improvised character to
even recorded punk music. To use Illich’s terms, the interaction between tools, performance, methods, and individuals is convivial.

My arguments for a slow archaeology shares an interest in conviviality when it seeks to privilege unstructured or less structured engagements with the countryside, embodied field practices like illustrating and note taking by hand, and avoiding the fragmentation of archaeological information into smaller bit of “data.” On the one hand, I remain optimistic that such views of the use of digital technology in archaeology are likely to be superseded as scholars continue to unpack the complex relationship between archaeologists and technology. The transhuman archaeologist is much more likely to recognize the interplay between ourselves and the various digital “cognitive artifacts” that expand our ability to think about, recognize, or produce archaeological objects (Huggett 2017).

Disciplinary Practice

The dense interdependence of tools, techniques, methods, and individuals embodies a transhuman archaeology that has the potential to transform the social organization of archaeological practice. Digital technology, for example, whatever its integrative potential, relies, in part, on the industrialist and Taylorist approach of dividing complex tasks into rather more simple ones. In digital technology, this produces interchangeable media which allows for information to be aggregated in different ways. As such, digital practices embrace some of the logical of the assembly line, but tend to reject its linearity. In its place, digital practices have celebrated the potential for a “web” of digitally networked world, but they both share the efficiency of fragmenting work as a way, on the one hand, to mitigate differences in experience and expertise, and, on the other hand, to facilitate new combinations of archaeological information, but allowing for the disaggregation of archaeological information previously embedded in archival contexts, catalogues or other forms of more rigidly structured relationships.

As one example, Open Context provides a platform for the highly granular publication of archaeological data, which allows archaeologists to establish a stable URI for each artifact. The allows for artifact (or strata or survey units or photographs) to be shared, linked, combined, and remixed in different ways, and also highlights the pressures and potential to fracture and fragment digital data. A another example, various crowd-sourced research projects (e.g. Sarah Parcak work) have likewise shown how digital tools allows for fragmented bits of knowledge to be marshaled to address complex archaeological problems. Digital mediation in these contexts allow for the collecting of archaeological information from an unstructured cluster of participants. Obviously the use of crowdsourcing, where a large community acts as a kind of mechanical turk, is not ideal for all forms of archaeological knowledge making, but where is it applicable, it does present a distinct form of deskilling. With the increasing mobility of archaeological information, ease of integrating diverse collaborators, and granularity of specialization, the social impact of these kinds of systems on the discipline remains unclear.

I recognize that by following the logic of Ellul, Illich, and other anti-modernists, I am predisposed to focus on the use of remote, structured or simplified recording digital recording interfaces, the ease of point-and-click data manipulation, or the use of software to synthesize unstructured data such as generated by digital photography into 3D structure-from-motion images (Morgan and Knight 2017). I do, however, think that the adoption of digital tools and the
understanding of digital technologies at both a conceptual and applied level is not merely exchanging one set of skills for another (pace Roosevelt et al.) or another way to communicate and publish the same archaeological knowledge. The fragmentation of information through the use of digital tools and techniques in certain cases parallels the transformation of ontological assumptions of archaeological work and this would seem to anticipate certain intellectual and practical consequences.

In other words, shifting from an assembly line model to a digital model in field work both reflects modern ways of thinking about efficiency and ontology, while at the same time, transforming the organization of archaeological work. Just as an approach to archaeology grounded in assemblages of individuals, objects, places, and pasts, has produced new and hybridized ways of understanding the past in the present, so the distributed character of digital practices and their reliance on computer algorithm or software introduces distinctive logic of practice to field work and interpretation.

Jacques Ellul’s work stressed how efficiency and specialization are bound up in the fuzzy concept of technique which he identifies as the driving force behind human decision making. For Ellul, modern technique is the desire to work efficiently as an end unto itself. Archaeology, on the one hand, as a discipline that emerged alongside industrial practices has always privileged efficiency in organization, documentation, and work. This is not to say that individual archaeologists only and always privileged efficiency, of course, but the very concept of specialization in approaches, methods, procedures, and experiences represents a kind of technique that has played a historically significant role in the production of archaeological knowledge. Practices that marked an individuals specialized skills from carefully maintained notebooks of the trench supervisor or the intricate illustrations of the architect today represent some of the very fields that digital practices propose to refine and improve.

The use of digital tools to produce more efficient data collection has anticipated the recent fascination with "Big Data" well in advance of the consistent demonstration of its results (Kansa 2017; Bevan 20xx). This is not to say that big data will not lead to important breakthroughs in our field, but to suggest that the efficiency possible in digital data collection, analysis, and dissemination, has outpaced our ability to formulate questions. As Roosevelt and others cleverly quipped, digitization is an alternative to destruction in the context of field practice, but it is not the same as the creation of meaningful pasts.

**Conclusions**

If Ellul and Illich saw the technological revolution of the 20th century as fundamentally disruptive to the creative instincts and autonomy of individuals because it falsely privileged speed and efficiency as the foundations for a better world, then this same strain of reasoning in archaeological practice should give us pause. My conclusion is a call for an “archaeology of care” that take cues from Illich and Ellul in considering how interaction between tools, individuals, practices, and methods shaped our discipline in both intentional and unintentional ways.

I’ve been concerned by a process that Gary Hall has called “uberfication,” which he has applied to changes in higher education in the United States (Hall 2016). The Uberfied University uses data to map the most efficient connections between the skills of the individual instructors and needs of
individual students at scale. To be clear, this is a dystopian vision rather than an actual plan, but it reflects larger trends on public and private sectors which see the analysis of data as the key to efficiency within complex systems. It likewise relies on the ability not only to link individual agents to particular needs but also on the network’s ability to shape the behavior of agents to satisfy the various needs across the entire network. The data, in this arrangement, is not passive, but an active participant in the shaping the entire assemblage.

The issue, of course, isn’t the existence of the assemblage; in fact, our recognition of the assemblage is what makes both its existence and its critique possible. What causes me anxiety is that the tools and techniques available to the transhuman archaeologist are as embedded in archaeological practices as they are in the logic of capital, efficiency, and modernity. The performative context of archaeological practice, whether “punk” or otherwise, offers the space for critical engagement. “Slow archaeology,” despite its grounding in privilege, nevertheless offers an ideal archaeological future that challenges the expectations of efficiency. Finally, an “archaeology of care“ is my term for an approach to the discipline that embraces human consequences of both our methods and the pasts that they create.