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Mormonism and the Archaeology of Media

Mason Kamana Allred

The angel [of history] would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.

He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging.

—Walter Benjamin¹

MORMONISM HAS A LEGACY OF DIGGING UP THE DEAD. It had early desires to excavate the past, not only metaphorically (through meticulous record keeping and strong ancestral ties), but literally by actually digging up dead material. Think Alvin, Zelph, gold plates, treasure, spirits, and angels.² Even Joseph and Hyrum Smith were disinterred and

1. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 257; and *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004), 2:576.

2. These digs also came in a broader context of money digging and the disinterment of corpses for anatomical studies. See Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 54; Tim Marshall, *Murdering to Dissect: Grave-Robbing, Frankenstein, and the Anatomy Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); and Alan Taylor, “The Early Republic’s Supernatural Economy: Treasure Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780–1830,” *American Quarterly* 38/1 (1986): 6–34.

moved. Current digital attention to databases of the dead that coincide with corporeal proxy work in temples is a kind of disinterring under new technical circumstances. Mormonism won't let the past rest—that is, not until it has been treated and properly cared for.

Analyzing Mormon mining proclivities—from digging up the gold plates to using FamilySearch.org—requires theoretical tools. “Media archaeology,” which methodologically digs up lost objects and resurrects dead media conditions, offers promise for future Mormon studies. As an offshoot of German media theory, or *Medienwissenschaft*, media archaeology draws heavily from Friedrich Kittler's emphasis on technical history. It often seeks out obsolete and marginalized machinery of the past to expose the fallacy of linear technological development and to explore the initial vitality of dead media. By also adapting elements of discourse analysis as advocated by the French philosopher Michel Foucault and New Historicism, media archaeology unearths the material manifestation of culture.

Such an approach can reveal how (even forgotten) media have galvanized and shaped Mormonism since its very inception. The Mormon religion is particularly ripe for media archaeology, as it offers a robust history of inspired material. Strata of past Mormon mediation are numerous—from seer stones, Oliver Cowdery's divining rod, metal plates, papyrus, and paintings to Philo Farnsworth's image dissector, cassette tapes, and code. With a new focus on how these objects mediated between body and spirit, we might more precisely exhume the materiality behind the concepts of early Mormonism that could mistakenly be understood to defy perceptibility, such as revelation, spirit, and translation.³

These core elements of Mormonism are apparent in journals, letters, scripture, and so forth. But that skin scarcely covers the work of media and organs of perception beneath. Media archaeology can peel back the textuality of the religion's past to reveal its technological skeleton. It exposes the role of media in shaping and enabling discourse

3. It is precisely mediation that can make these concepts accessible. See Birgit Meyer, “Medium,” *Material Religion* 7/1 (2011): 61.

networks and getting under the skin of humans. Moving from textuality to media materiality—from language to machines—can foreground the cultural and theological dynamism of Mormonism.

Since Mormonism is deeply materialist in its distinctive theology and philosophy, it likewise requires a unique media theory.⁴ Fittingly, Mormon media archaeology follows Mormonism's lead in caring for and about materiality and embodiment. Unlike much mainstream media archaeology, the Mormon version must attend to the bodies that might otherwise be tossed to the wayside of posthuman, informational, or technological processes. Directing our attention to the body and affect in the face of media effects can uncover how scientific and technological conditions scaffold the flesh and blood of the Mormon cultural landscape and “even our basic ways of being in the world: seeing, hearing, thinking and feeling.”⁵ But attending to the hardware (machines) of Mormonism will also inevitably reveal just how integral to its theology wetware (the human body) really is. Like a hauntingly suggestive form of zombie media, Joseph Smith's chocolate-brown seer stone is back, lumbering through the internet in digital form. But the stone is also, significantly, divorced from a reading body—like a cassette tape with no boombox. Often in less confounding ways, Mormonism invites media studies approaches at the nexus of corporeal practice and material machinery, where uniquely Mormon cultural techniques are born.

Sensational forms and sensory media seem to need the fleshly body to write upon in order to provoke spiritual experience. Intelligence seems also to require the body to sense and secure feeling and truth. In Mormonism, the path to spirituality is often *through the body*. Probing the strata of language, medium specificity, and embodied experience shows us what is only apparently a contradiction: media seek to

4. See Samuel Morris Brown and Kate Holbrook, “Embodiment and Sexuality in Mormon Thought,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (Cambridge, MA: Oxford University Press, 2015), 292–307; John Durham Peters, “Reflections on Mormon Materialism,” *Sunstone*, March 1993, 47–52; and Rosalynde Welch, “The New Mormon Theology of Matter,” *Mormon Studies Review* 4 (2017): 64–65.

5. Jussi Parikka, *What Is Media Archaeology?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 7.

provide immediate communion with God and fellow humans through mediation.

Consider a medium for unearthing the dead: nineteenth-century Mormon large-scale panorama paintings. Today they are obsolete, a mere curiosity of art history. But both Philo Dibble's (1845) and C. C. A. Christensen's (ca. 1880) oversized sequential paintings of church history responded to, captured, and shaped conceptions of spiritually enhanced vision. The various forgotten dimensions of panoramas cry from the dust and require reclamation at three levels:

1. Language: Wilford Woodruff, who lectured at panorama shows, subsequently described his own spiritual visions as "panoramas," which he wished he could paint for others to see.⁶ Similarly, George Q. Cannon described visions as "panoramas, with the rapidity of lightning."⁷ Even John's apocalypse was formulated as a "mighty panorama."⁸ These understandings emerged from the specificities of the apparatus. The panorama and its attendant experience undergirded and enabled the conceptualization of revelatory experience. Like most spiritual technologies, Mormon panoramas combined both up-in-the-clouds and on-the-ground Mormonism—they made heaven and earth shake hands.
2. Medium specificity: Panorama offered an "all-encompassing view" for all, characterized by sharing, unity, and standardization. Through techniques of movement, either walking between displayed scenes or simulated movement by mechanical crank to roll scenes between two dowels behind a proscenium, panoramas could create sequence. Often with loops running ninety minutes in length, the technology was

6. *Journal of Discourses*, 2:199 (1855); and Brian Stuy, ed., *Collected Discourses* (Burbank, CA: B. H. S. Publishing, 1987), 1:217.

7. George Q. Cannon, "Discourse," *Deseret News*, May 25, 1889, 677.

8. Orson F. Whitney, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26:264 (1886).

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not just precinematic, but connected to the experience of travel by steamboat, carriage, and especially train.⁹

3. Embodied experience: The medium's association with trajectory, moving forward (on), was particularly felicitous in the aftermath of Joseph Smith's assassination, when Mormons needed to dig up the past and make it alive and shared. The Dibble panorama resurrected an image of the dead prophet for communal consumption. Especially with reports of revenant Smith's appearing to his followers, the panorama's ability to capture Smith's afterimage did important cultural work to drown out competing visions.¹⁰ Dibble even claimed Smith appeared to him in a dream and called him to the work of panorama displays.¹¹ A vision of the dead inspired the paintings of the past. Dibble's marketing evinced his intended aesthetic necromancy in making "a Joseph and a Hyrum appear and speak to the eye and heart of the thousands of Saints assembled."¹² The medium could mediate subjective spiritual vision(s) and translate it into shared objective vision, as a collective and affective experience. Panoramas (both static and moving) called for specific modes of bodily attention and promised prosthetic vision. Panoramas visualized and stored memories, as they offered low-tech tele-vision, seeing across space and time.

9. Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions of Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 7, 107.

10. For visions of Smith, see Christopher James Blythe, "'Would to God, Brethren, I Could Tell You Who I Am!' Nineteenth-Century Mormonisms and the Apotheosis of Joseph Smith," *Nova Religio* 18/2 (Fall 2014): 2, 7.

11. Philo Dibble's *Reminiscences of Early Church History and the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Marilyn A. Smith and Celia Smith (Logan, UT: M. A. Smith, 1995), in the Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

12. Philo Dibble, "Brother Philo Dibble's Sceneries, Museum, &c.," *Millennial Star* 11 (January 1849): 11. The image of Smith was even displayed next to an image of Jesus raising Lazarus. Stout journal, March 7 and April 10, 1845, Church History Library.

We might claim that the panorama helped standardize the Mormon gaze.

Where a vision of the dead prophet Joseph in 1844 inspired the first Mormon panorama, the realized technology of television in 1948 inspired Clifford Young's imaginary hope to one day see spirits in the next world. At the first televised general conference, Young stated (into the microphone and camera) how the "achievement of television" made him wonder "if perhaps the time will not come when we can see our loved ones on the other side. That is not beyond the pale of possibility."¹³ Young saw in the technology an alternative spiritual future in a long line of Mormon leaders using new media to imagine religious possibilities. Acknowledging this spectral tradition in Mormon thought should foster an openness to dead media and recover a forgotten sense of possibility. Mormon materialism nudges media archaeology to remember the ghost in Holy Ghost.

Especially in Mormonism, which elevates perfected existence to body *and* spirit, both must be in the equation (see D&C 93:33). After all, it's all matter. Spirit is just finer and purer (see D&C 131:7).¹⁴ Excavating the Mormon past through media theory needs to leave room for—and even expect—angels and spirits. The same technologies that render specters manageable, or even reproducible, also multiply spectral possibilities. In a sense, all mediated messages are "communication with the dead, insofar as media can store 'phantasms of the living' for playback after bodily death."¹⁵ Or as Kittler put it, "The realm of the dead is as extensive as the storage and transmission capabilities of a

13. Young was serving as Assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles; see Conference Report, April 1948, 38.

14. See also Jordan Watkins, "Early Mormonism and the Re-Enchantment of Antebellum Historical Thought," *Journal of Mormon History* 38/3 (Summer 2012): 203.

15. John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 142.

given culture.”¹⁶ Unearthing religious media networks will also likely release technical and metaphorical ghosts of the past (or past futures).

Excavating forgotten networks of media, bodies, and spirit requires work, especially archival research and creativity. Technologies, once alive and well, are often, at some point, put aside and become overgrown with dust, sediment, and time. Material media become slippery—like the treasures at hunts or when the Nephites grow wicked—and slide from historical view (see Helaman 13:31). This can make digging a chore. But a Mormon media archaeology would infuse this cultural work with the spiritual potential to recover buried Mormonism(s) and conditions of being. This echoes more closely the earliest forms of digging in Mormonism, which were far from the violent side of mining and closer to the romantic tradition, which saw excavations as paths toward enlightenment.¹⁷ To dig deep in the earth was to seek celestial treasures and true religion. Both “prayers” and “precious knowledge” enabled miners, as “underground heroes,” to receive “heavenly gifts” by digging.¹⁸ To be sure, as Thoreau quipped, the head, too, can be an effective “organ for burrowing.”¹⁹ Recuperating and analyzing matter of the past, Mormon media archaeology could do what Mormonism has always sought to do: properly treat the dead and buried.

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16. Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 13.

17. Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 68.

18. Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (Berlin: Reimer, 1837), 84.

19. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 93.