Chapter 3

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The Ghosts of Media Archaeology

> 'A spectre is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*' (Derrida, 1994, p. 11)

> 'The writing of history is as personal an act as the writing of fiction' (Susman 2003, p. xiii)

This chapter is concerned with the experimental nature of media archaeology, an aspect of the discipline that is receiving a growing amount of attention. Since its inception, the study of media archaeology has encouraged a diversity of approaches, practices, and voices. Erik Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka describe this variety of perspectives and range of debates as 'polylogues' (Huhtamo and Parikka, p. 2). Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, seen as founders of media archaeological thinking, talked about the practice of 'nomadology'– the adoption of multiple narratives that are, in effect, the 'opposite of a history' (Deleuze and Guattari, p. 24). Meanwhile, Siegfried Zielinski petitions for discovering 'fractures or turning points in historical master plans' (Zielinski, p. 7). His 'variantology' project (2007) is built on the urge to 'be different, to deviate, to change, to modify' (Huhtamo and Parikka, p. 12).
 In 2013, Fickers and Van den Oever published an essay entitled 'Experimental Media Archaeology: A Plea for New Directions' (2013). The authors noted and praised the achievements made by the previous methodologies based on discourse, but at the same time stressed that 'the materiality of media technologies and the practices of use need more attention' (Fickers and Van den Oever, 2013). Reworking R. Collingwood's notions in *The Idea of History*, Fickers and Van den Oever propose that we view the 'idea of re-enactment as a heuristic concept of historical understanding'. This is an extension of Collingwood's idea of 'experiencing history' as doing historical re-enactments in practice, not just in theory – or, as *Gedankenexperimente*' (*Ibid*., p. 273). The now somewhat unfashionable multi-stranded 'cultural studies' approach to the understanding of modernity, postmodernity, and media is never far away from the development of thinking on media archaeology. We can see, then, that current thinking in the field urges that we work on technologies and histories of media from a variety of diverse and experimental processes all the while keeping media technologies and materials close to hand.
 While these proposals could work very well for the practice and method of media archaeology, it will be essential to also generate some new provocative thinking about how academics, writers, and critics write about and respond textually to the subject in an experimental manner. As Lev Manovich demonstrated in *The Language of New Media*, the development of new media technologies has actually always been linked to and developed out of various historical avant-gardes, and media archaeology also enjoys a similar potential to integrate (experimentally) science, technology, and the arts (Huhtamo and Parikka, p. 13). As Parikka points out, 'media archaeology is interested in the anomalous' (Parikka, p. 90) and in methods that 'use, pervert and modulate' (*Ibid.*, p. 161). Meanwhile, Elsaesser, in his work on the 'New Film History', has drawn attention to the connections between early cinema and the avant-garde tradition in defining the 'peculiar nature of the cinematic experience' (Huhtamo and Parikka, p. 12). This cinematic 'enchantment' was of particular interest to early surrealist, impressionist, and constructivist theorists and practitioners of the film arts. It is precisely this experimental approach that I wish to discuss here.

Avant-Garde Media Archaeology

The tradition in avant-garde movements is to proceed by way of the manifesto, a crystallization of thinking and method proposed to reinvent life and art. Think of the famous revolutionary iconoclastic texts produced in the early twentieth century by the Futurist, Dada, and Surrealist movements for example (in 1909, 1916, and 1924/1929 respectively). In this essay, I obviously want to stop well short of offering anything as presumptuous and grandiose as a text of similar ambition, but I do wish to briefly discuss two possible approaches to an experimental form of writing about media technologies that may be useful for reinventing the field.

While Fickers and Van den Oever explain that 'Experimental Media Archaeology' is 'inspired by the idea of historical re-enactment as a heuristic methodology', I want to argue that it is possible to go a step further (or to the side) and develop a strategy of *heuretic* methodology based largely on the application of the ideas of the theories of American scholars Gregory Ulmer and Robert B. Ray. It is not so much that their ideas can be incorporated into media archaeology discourse, but more that they offer a set of open and free approaches that are methodologically relevant and intellectually stimulating.

In *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention*, Ulmer proposes that theory is assimilated into the humanities by two methods: firstly, by 'critical interpretation' and secondly by 'artistic experiment'– what he defines as 'heuretics' (Ulmer, p. 3). This heuretic process belongs to the tradition of the 'discourse on method' and can be represented mnemonically by the acronym *CATTt*. 'The *CATTt*', explains Ulmer, includes the following 'operations':

C= Contrast (opposition, inversion, differentiation)
A= Analogy (figuration, displacement)
T= Theory (repletion, literalization)
T= Target (application, purpose)
t= Tale (secondary elaboration, representability) (*Ibid.,* 8)

As a method for the proposal of inventing new ideas, I believe this 'CATTt' could be relevant as an application for the study of media archaeology, or at least the interpretation of media-archaeological objects.

At the very basic level, we can outline how this might work. We may begin by firmly rejecting conventional thinking about archives and the material and objects held within them ('Contrast'). The next stage is to find an analogue ('Analogy') for our new method. Fickers and Van den Oever suggest one method, that of 're-enactment'. While we may initially associate this practice with the vaguely regressive form of historical reconstruction of important military battles, Fickers and Van den Oever believe re-enactment can 'make scholars of past media technologies 'experience' (rather than intellectually appropriate) the acts of making and screening film as social and cultural practices' (Fickers and Van den Oever, p. 275). Ulmer himself suggests a textual practice ('Theory') that may be of use to experimental media archaeologists when he discusses Derrida's book *Glas* – an experimental combination of considerations on the writings of the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and the self-styled poet-thief Jean Genet. The texts in *Glas* are presented as two visually distinct but philosophically connected columns. It may be that that this approach, simulating the way we experience electronic media, has a useful application for the study of media artefacts by offering a potential comparative method for a media object (for example, the electro-mechanical tape keyboard called the Mellotron) and its textual partner (the handbook manual), or to different media-archaeological texts, such as manuals and handbooks for the same piece of technology but from slightly different historical moments (or texts on the same piece of technology by different authors, etc.). The aim of an experimental heuretic approach would be to critique existing methods of media archaeology and indeed museum and curatorial practices/theories (which would be the 'Target') in order to reposition thinking on the subject. As to the form this new approach would take (what Ulmer calls the 'tale'), it would need to be a new and stimulating dialogue on the history of media and technology, surprising and challenging in its form and function, much as Benjamin's Arcades Project was. As Ulmer admits, such experiments are 'offered not as a proof or assertion of

truth but as a trial or a test […] the value will be determined by those who choose to try it' (Ulmer, pp. 38–39). The forms of the CATTt can, of course, be altered by each user. Forms of current online interventions into media archaeology such as the cross-media Robin the Fog website (Accessed 2 June 2017: https://robinthefog.com) may offer guidance. Or, Piccini's radical work on a particular urban space (also in this volume), and the psychological, emotional, and spiritual evocation of a mediated technology environment could also be a method to be adapted and utilized.

While Ulmer has used the CATTt process to think about digital media, another academic, Robert B. Ray, has adopted the acronym as an exploration of analogue media, specifically film and music. Ray describes how developmental processes in general and academic practice in particular can become, like the technical processes of capitalist production, 'path dependent'. The field of media archaeology is no different in being vulnerable to this. So, for Ray, a heuretic methodology is a way of reinventing a discipline such as film studies (or, of course, media archaeology). In *How a Film Theory Got Lost*, Ray explains that '[a] heuretic film studies might begin where *photogénie*, third meanings and fetishism intersect; with the cinematic detail whose insistent appeal eludes precise explanation' (Ray, p. 13). This approach is part nomadic future-thinking and, as Ray takes a fresh look at early 'lost' film theory, part historical reinvention. It seems possible that within the study of media objects and their histories, we can locate and identify these small details that jump out and can lead to interesting and inventive investigative techniques. Ray, in another article on film theory, suggests adopting the psychogeographic techniques (where the film landscape can be traversed like a geographic space) evident in W.G Sebald's writings to uncover the meanings of a film text (Ray, 2000).

But, how could this work for media objects? An example from my own personal experience may be instructive here. Whilst investigating the history of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop in the collections of the National Science and Media Museum (part of the wider UK Science Museum group), I chanced upon a black-and-white press photograph of the Kentish home of Daphne Oram, one of the founders of the Workshop. As this image was intended for newspaper publication (it was part of an archive from the now defunct *Daily Herald*) it was marked on the reverse with various scribbles and pasted press cuttings. One particular phrase from a cutting caught my eye: 'Tower Folly – house of strange sounds'. Another image, a well-known portrait of Oram, also had pasted on the back an article leading with the sentence: 'The village constable here has been warned. Any shrieks coming from Miss Daphne Oram's house around 2 a.m. can be disregarded.' These seemingly trifling details are the kind of dialectical anecdotal fragments that so captivated Walter Benjamin in the production of his famous 'Arcades Project' and are drawn upon by Ray to discuss film culture. At one level, the words are just 'information'. Yet, the evocative presence and the imaginative power of these words on the back of the photographs led me to reflect on the almost supernatural nature of mid-twentieth-century electronic media; the (hidden) domestic sphere of experimental production; the often neglected role of women in this tale; the relationship between female avant-garde electronic composer and bewitchment.   It is the aleatory element of Ray's writings that has perhaps the most to offer media archaeology. As Elsaesser (2008) has also suggested, these techniques can found in early film theory and follows a strong French tradition of wordplay and invention from André Breton to Georges Perec, Raymond Queneau, and the Oulipo Group of producing interpretations using chance, ludology, automatism, and improvisation.

In another essay, 'Tracking', Ray proposes to approach the study of popular music by writing an essay in the manner of the way in which popular music is produced. This means mimicking with words the mixing together of different sound elements found in the process of creating recorded music. Ray asks 'What if academics were to write essays the way that Paul Simon (or Public Enemy) write songs?' (Ray, p. 66). 'Tracking' proceeds by setting out six 'tracks' of thought on sound and theory, bringing them together for a final 'mix' at the end of the essay, if you like, a slightly more complex reworking of Derrida's *Glas*. This experimental process ends with an interesting reversal of what Ray started out with – the notion of recording as a form of writing. 'Writing, as the more advanced technology, has been

the example for recording. What, after all, is sampling except quotation, which writers do all the time? [...] What are multi-tracks but columns?' (this also echoes Derrida's *Glas*). I can envisage this method working for both the experimental mixing together of found texts on media objects and/or the combining of different sound elements drawn from different audio-visual technologies to create a new work. The value of experimental techniques is therefore to open up the possibility of seeing media objects and archives another way round, from different, unforeseen perspectives, or to uncover some new thinking on what was thought to be a previously 'known' technology.

Ghosts In and Out of the Machine

Another way of resisting the academic tendency for repetition, stasis, or 'path dependency' is to search for what is to be found in the development of a phenomenon known as 'hauntology'. 'Hauntology' arises from Derrida's work on ghosts, history, and time in his book *Spectres of Marx*. Derrida's work in general is known for its utilization of avant-garde practice. For example, according to Ulmer (Ulmer, p. 5), Derrida's work is a 'renewal of the surrealist gesture' and it is this kind of gesture, of course, which has been problematic for analytic and rationalist schools of philosophical thinking (infamously resulting in Cambridge University casting him as an 'enemy of science and the Enlightenment' (*Ibid.*, p. 18). Derrida has regularly critiqued the linear notion of time and the determinist belief that ideas have their moment and then disappear on in to the historical past. According to Derrida, the peculiar state 'in-between' the living and the dead, applied to political thought, is also a space that has great potential for re-thinking and reinventing media artefacts. For Derrida, '[t]he logic of the spectre is that it regularly exceeds all the oppositions between visible and invisible, both phenomenal and nonphenomenal: a trace that marks the present with its absence in advance (Derrida and Stiegler, p. 117). Indeed, the appearance and re-appearance that occurs when we are arrested by media technologies is akin to a haunting: 'We are spectralized by the shot, captured or possessed by spectrality in advance' (*Ibid.*). Certainly, the more radical and playful interpretations of Derrida's concept of hauntology offer great potential for rethinking and reinventing our understanding of media technologies. Derrida's comments on the process of making the film *Ghost Dance* (which he 'stars' in) is also revealing in terms of how we interpret media. The strange experience he had when confronted with the image on screen years later of the actress (Pascale Ogier) in the film, who had since died, offers a reflection on the haunted nature of media and technology ('now yes, believe me, I believe in ghosts', Derrida says [*Ibid.*, p. 120]). At the same time, the more spectral dimensions of hauntology retain some of the more obvious aesthetic links between 'old' technologies and new methods of interpreting and examining film and media devices and artefacts. Friedrich Kittler, identified by Fickers and Van den Oever as the father of the material method, for example, found it instructive to combine technology with the supernatural in his texts, most startlingly in his analysis of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* novel and the media technologies deployed in the narrative by the protagonists (Kittler 1997). In this way, Kittler's work also becomes reminiscent of the aforementioned Sebald's 'novels' particularly *Austerlitz* (2001) and *Rings of Saturn* (1995), where history, myth, anecdote, and biography are freely combined. Derrida also reflects on the way in which film and photography as technologies of the image lack a 'tactile sensitivity' (Derrida and Stiegler, p. 115). However, it seems that the 'desire to touch, the tactile effect or affect' (*Ibid.*) could be realised and exploited by media archaeological practices, especially in the archive.

Derrida has also expressed a strong interest in what is known as 'Free Jazz' and musical improvisation. In his interview with the American composer and musician Ornette Coleman, Derrida explores the radical potential of repetition and improvisation stating that 'he very concept of improvisation verges upon reading, since what we understand by improvisation is the creation of something new, yet something which doesn't exclude the pre-written framework that makes it possible' (Murphy, p. 322). Derrida also repeats this theme in his reflections on the archive: 'There is no archive without a technique of repetition'

(Derrida 1996, p. 11), the archive working against itself. This is perhaps something we can reflect on in thinking about media archives in order to resist stasis. Even seemingly random expressions grow out of some pre-existing structure. For his part, Coleman also reflects on the notion of the past being reborn in the present: 'In jazz you can take a very old piece and do another version of it. What's exciting about it is the memory that you bring to the present' (*Ibid.*). The creative impulse comes not out of nothing but draws on the internal psychological forces as the framework. It can also be akin to the aesthetics of 'outsider art', where the aim is to interpret and create outside of the conventional values of training and instruction – a truly free form of expression. This strikes me as being a potentially useful mode of analysing, understanding the framework, and using media technologies (especially audio technologies) from the past and reworking them into a new mode of experience and expression. 'Outsider' responses can be as valid and rewarding as those of the trained archivist. This despite the fact that the form that metamorphoses into another form is, Coleman admits, 'something healthy, but very rare' (*Ibid.*).

One of the intriguing ways in which hauntology could relate to media archaeologies is the way in which Derrida refers to the phenomena of the *no longer*/*not yet* and also the *not yet happened* (Fisher, p. 19). The *no longer* can be the original uses of the technology or some of the artefacts from that usage that are now lost, abandoned, or broken. The *not yet happened* encapsulates the possibility that these technologies can be brought back to life in interesting and creative new ways. The understandable error in compiling exhibitions and curatorial presentations of media archaeology is to ossify the technology and/or its users into 'dead' forms of culture (placing them in glass cases for an audience to 'gawp at' being the most obvious example). As Derrida notes (when speaking of video tape), media may serve as 'an archive, perhaps an exhibit, perhaps as evidence, but it does not replace testimony' (Derrida and Stiegler, p. 94). As he goes on to say, '[t]echnics will never produce a testimony' (*Ibid.*) and so we are left with the interpretation of the archivist.

It is fair to say that, more recently, thinking in the world of curatorial practice has begun to acknowledge this problem. A recent example is the 2011 Science Museum (UK) exhibition *Oramics to Electronica: Revealing Histories of Electronic Music*, which incorporated practices such as co-curation, narratology, and the involvement of 'expert groups' to develop the exhibition. Despite these laudable and progressive aims, the exhibition, as at least one of the curators admitted, was flawed, as it did not develop the requisite level of creativity and deep encounter necessary to properly bring the specific audio technologies in the show 'back to life'. One of the authors of a report on the exhibition admits that '[if] audiences grab what they want from our displays, then it is arguable that the embodied narrative we impose becomes – in the purest case – chiefly a matter of convenience to us in deciding what we'd like to put where' (Boon *et al*. 2014). At the same time, they note that: 'It would be valuable to explore a more controversial theme using a public historical approach, where accounts would be likely to be contradictory' (*Ibid*). Thus, the need within archival and museum practice to encourage more experimental and radical, even contradictory approaches to an understanding of media archaeological phenomena and usages of that technology for new creative means, is clearly acknowledged. Derrida's hauntology project (and indeed much of his deconstruction work) set out to challenge existing certainties, notions of time and space, and to promote the rethinking of values and belief systems. As Fisher argues, 'hauntology concerns a crisis of space as well as time' (Fisher, p. 20). But this crisis can be turned to positive ends. From a creative, avant-garde perspective, a radical approach to both 'presence' and 'absence' in the cultural sphere is necessary and desirable. To repeat: it would therefore be intriguing if some of the more radical ideas about contemporary culture and academic practice could be brought to bear on media archaeology. Such radical ideas are, of course, concerned with avoiding stagnation of disciplines, a critical perspective on ideas and the goal to invent new approaches for the understanding of culture and media with potential further application or modification.

The link between material culture (media) and the occult (hidden) has been made before. As Winthrop-Young and Wutz acknowledge, the very idea of 'media' once 'conjured visions of spiritualism' (Winthrop-Young and Wutz, p. xii). Jeffrey Sconce has extended the

discussion of media into the realm of the occult arguing that 'the electronically mediate worlds of telecommunication often evoke the supernatural' (Sconce, p. 4). The electronic presence inherent in such media has, from day one, been connected to paranormal or spiritual phenomena. More recently still, Simone Natale has connected spiritualism with modern media culture asking questions about the 'intersection of religious experience with popular culture and mass media' (Natale, p.15). Eric McLuhan's 'Fordham Experiment' also examined the sensual and perceptive responses to media. What is interesting about this study is that one of the media objects used in the experiment, the avant-garde 'hauntological' film *Le songe des chevaux sauvages* (1960), is both technological advanced and mystically evocative and surreal, leading to surprising and revealing (if scientifically inconclusive) results (McLuhan 2000). There is, therefore, nothing to fear from extending the interpretation or analysis of media archaeology into unknown of unfamiliar territories, moving away from the purely sociological or material.

One of the most interesting examples of an archaeological study combining media technologies, experimental methods, and occult hauntological dimensions is the project developed by the American cultural historian Michael Lesy. Lesy's book *Wisconsin Death Trip* is a text made up of photographs by Charles Van Schaick, news reports, advertisements, and hospital patient records from the years 1885–1900 in Black River Falls, Wisconsin, combines material objects archaeological study, poetic interpretation with a clear hauntological dimension. The book is an attempt at recording a cultural history of a particular time and seemingly unremarkable place and the tragedies (murders, suicides, mental illness, infant mortality) that disproportionately seem to have emerged from that milieu. Lesy's work as an experimental interpretation of historical media has received its fair share of criticism. Gutman, for example, feels that Lesy 'ends up denying the existence of the people we see in the photographs' (Gutman, 1973, p. 488) and undoes the belief systems the protagonists in the photographs are alleged to have held. Lesy's 'selection' process is also criticized, as is his tendency to combine 'historical account, the novel and psychological profile' with the language 'of a poet' (Smith, p. 48). Lesy himself describes *Wisconsin Death Trip* as 'an experiment of alchemy' (Lesy, 1973) and his work in general as being akin to Freud's 'dream work' – 'multiple meanings, condensed, displaced, transformed and revised at the very moment, in the very act, of being remembered' (Lesy 2007, p. 143). The book's lack of page numbers is frequently remarked on as being problematic. Lesy's other open and experimental works have fared no better, one critic stating that his book *Bearing Witness* (1983) left a 'bad taste in my mouth' (Brown, p. 43). Yet, *Wisconsin Death Trip* now feels more like an exemplary instance of Walter Benjamin's methods as set out in the 'Arcades Project', a keystone text of media archaeology and the multiple meanings, etc. of a dream work offering exciting possibilities for interpretation of media objects. A student reviewer of Lesy's methodology hit the nail on the head when they remarked that 'I suspect that his book intends to call into question the accepted practices of historical scholarship and contemporary methods of preserving context and objectivity, as well as the over-estimated assumptions of photography's truthfulness' (Smith, p. 54). A film adaptation of the book made by James Marsh in 1999 similarly attempted to offer a 'self-contained world' (Dawson 2004), rather than a supposedly 'factual' historical document. Lesy's attitude to the accompanying text of the book echoes the experimental methods discussed above: 'The final text was composed of five types of people talking at once, sometimes about the same things, like witnesses to an accident, sometimes about different things, like the chroniclers of a court history' (Lesy 1973). In a sense, this is Lesy's version of Ray's 'Tracking'.

Fisher (2014) has identified the importance of analogue culture on our sense of the hauntological. In particular, he focuses on music culture and what he describes as the principle 'sonic signature of hauntology: the use of crackle, the surface noise made by vinyl' (*Ibid.*, p. 21). This sonic technical 'error' and failure has been turned into a virtue and a symbol of postmodern experience, a marker of the state we currently live in, where it is possible to challenge and subvert linear progressive thinking about technology and expectations of audio 'quality'. Our experience of listening to the 'crackle' of the past reminds us that we are self-consciously reconstructing something (both in terms of the object

and its playback mechanism). This has exciting possibilities for media archaeologists where the 'faults' and 'errors' become part of the interpretive experience and the critical reading. It seems that as *Wisconsin Death Trip* captures the grain, degradation, and fade of Van Schaick's photographs, there is a possibility of re-enacting the historical past to better understand the future to come. Fisher goes on: 'Crackle makes us aware that we are listening to a time out of joint' (*Ibid*). So, why not embrace this kind of distortion and work with it, as the artists and musicians Fisher promotes – such as Leyland Kirby aka 'The Caretaker' – notably do? Kirby himself notes: 'More research will have to be done before I find the best pathway for future exploration' (*Ibid.*, p. 119). It is the very 'crackle' of past media that hold the greatest secrets, the 'refusal to give up on the desire for the future' (*Ibid*.). The nostalgia, even melancholia, for the materiality of the past, key to our understanding of the hauntological, can be harnessed by experimental archivists and curators. At the same time, the impact of internet technologies on the understanding of archives and archaeology is also relevant as this is the technology that has most radically altered space and time, or the 'tele-technology' (*Ibid.*, p. 20), of the contemporary world.

   As Warren Susman lays out in the preface to *Wisconsion Death Trip*, Lesy has contributed to an experimental method in locating the 'underworld' (Susman, 1973) of historical truth. He has produced the kind of 'surrealist montage' (Arendt, p. 47) that has been attributed to Benjamin's method, but in this instance and for our purposes is importantly about media (photographs, etc.) and so is concerned with a visual form of 'quotation' (Susman, p.3). Above all, Lesy's work is about 'a willingness to see things anew' (*Ibid.*).

   In 2012, Parikka, drawing on Michel Foucault's genealogical method, which avoids an obsession with the 'origins' of things, noted that the practice of media archaeology is 'looking for *alternative* presents and past- and futures' (Parikka, p. 12). Derrida argues that the archive was both '[r]evolutionary and traditional' (Derrida, 1996, p. 7). It is perhaps the latter that has been foregrounded historically and we must celebrate somehow both the destruction and the preservation of media culture (a condition that Derrida calls 'archive fever' [*Ibid.*, p. 12]). Experimental media archaeology therefore must 'break the law' and offer new alternative visions on the technologies that have shaped our media world. It must somehow educate us about the significance of media in the modern world and, at the same time, capture the spirit of media artefacts, rising to the challenge of explaining the 'virtual space of spectrality' set by Derrida while answering his lament that '[t]here has never been a scholar who really, and as a scholar, deals with ghosts' (Derrida 1994, p. 11). Above all, it needs to achieve the power of radical imaginative retelling and interpretation, contentious but thrilling, Lesy achieved with his study of a set of photographs from a small forgotten town in nineteenth-century America.

> [The book's] primary intention is to make you experience the pages now before you as a flexible mirror that if turned one way can reflect the odour of the air that surrounded me as I wrote this; if turned another, can project your anticipation of next Monday; if turned again can transmit the sound of breathing in the deep winter ait of a room of eighty years ago, and if tuned once again, this time backward onto itself, can fuse all three images, and so can focus who I was, what you might be, and what might have happened, all upon a single point of your imagination, and transform them like light focused by a lens on paper, from a lower form of energy to a higher (Lesy, 1973).

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