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The Recurrent, the Recombinatory and the Ephemeral

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Although America's film critics had mixed reviews of Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*, many agreed in their assessment of the film's editing, singling out the rapid cutting pace and using terms such as 'frenetic', 'radical' even 'hallucinatory'. Some argued that the film stood as proof of the corrosive impact of television advertising and video clip culture, evidence that their formal strategies were leaching into the cinematic mainstream. It sounded very promising indeed! At the time of the film's American premiere, I was in the Netherlands, carefully tracking the reviews and counting the weeks until the Dutch release of the film. The big day arrived, and I vividly recall sitting through the usual block of product advertisements, previews and instructional messages, only to find the opening salvo of Stone's film a bit, well, ... plodding. In fact, with a few glorious exceptions, the pace of the entire film failed to evoke the descriptions issuing fourth from American reviewers. The reason for the discrepancy was clear: most reviewers saw their films in special press screenings, free from the distractions of the popcorn-eating crowd, and cut loose from the larger enveloping context of previews and ancillary material (pre-film advertisements were in any case not yet common in US cinemas). By contrast, my viewing of the film in Utrecht was preceded by fifteen minutes of visual material (including some ads also run on television) dominated by bursts of one and two second long shots. Stone's film was certainly more quickly paced than those of his Hollywood contemporaries, but compared to the ads and previews that prefaced my viewing, it felt much closer to standard cinematic fare.

Cinema advertisements, previews and instructionals certainly deserve more serious critical attention than they have received. As cinematic texts, they are, after all, viewed significantly more often than the features they accompany. The same short-form films often accompany multiple features; and while we tend towards a single viewing of feature films, we might view the same ads or instructionals every time we go to the cinema over three month period. One form of ephemeral cinema, these texts deserve scrutiny as such. But my interest is less with the textual specificities of these short and frequently re-viewed films than with their contextual potentials. Rather, I am interested in the ephemeral as a textual condition, and specifically in the metatextual implications of ephemeral texts. In time-based media such as film, radio and television, where the flow of texts both ephemeral and privileged is constructed by its exhibitors and experienced by its audiences, how might we account for the *frisson* produced by placing one text next to another, and by the excess of meaning that might be generated? Gerard Genette has explored this space more thoroughly than most, focusing on the domain of the literary (the book) rather than on time-based media. This has yielded many sharp insights regarding the role of textual positioning (paratexts, for example) in shaping the meaning and import of the central text, but it has also left certain issues hanging precariously on the margins. Sergei Eisenstein also considered the role of textual positioning primarily through his theories of montage. His (and the generation of filmmakers who studied with Lev Kuleshov) contributions focused on the micro-level of shot-to-shot relations and their implications for the decentering of the shot as a unit of meaning, shifting attention instead to the interaction of shots, the shot sequence, as the site of meaning. His insights, like

Genette's, bear on the discussion to follow. This essay will attempt to situate and briefly develop some of these insights as they relate in particular to the role of ephemeral texts in existing commercial television regimes, and in the emerging practices within participatory television forms such as YouTube.

The Ephemeral

The word 'ephemeral' carries with it a curious tale. Among the clusters of available definitions, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Second Edition, 1989) offers the following:

- Ephemera, n. 1.** An insect that (in its imago or winged form) lives only for a day. In mod. entomology the name of a genus of pseudo-neuropterous insects belonging to the group *Ephemerida* (Day-flies, May-flies).
- 2. transf. and fig.** One who or something which has a transitory existence.

The May-fly literalized the ancients' understanding of the transitory, granting it an iridescent form and fleeting yet pristine beauty that lingers on as object lesson in our language. But to our contemporary ears, this definition of the ephemeral-as-transitory generally skews differently, evoking Baudelaire's notion of modernity as the 'transient, the fleeting, the contingent.' An affect or stance that speaks to the myriad sensations that constitute our present, to impressions more evocative than substantive, this sense of the transitory and ephemeral arises from such late 19th Century conditions as overstimulation, from mechanically enhanced tempos, and from new cacophonies anything but natural in their order. And they are manifest in time-based media in at least three ways.

First, both recorded and transmitted image and sound – the telephone, television, radio, gramophone and film – are experienced in a perpetual present. We engage in an always fleeting but nevertheless persistent embrace of the images and sounds in the fullness of their 'nowness'. The images (or sounds) that we have already seen (or heard) function as a just-witnessed (and now remembered) past, fundamental to our experience and sense-making, but fundamentally different in possibility, their potentials always-already realized. As viewers, we are poised on the cusp of the known and the unknown, and witness there the unfolding actualization of near-infinite possibility into concrete images and sounds ... and meanings. This present, in which we 'watch' a film or television program or 'listen' to radio, is at odds with our notion of media as a physical product (a reel of tape), or as a referenced or advertised text or program entity, or as a copyrighted legal entity. These conceptions are outside of time's flow; but not the experience of listening or viewing, which are very much part of it.

A second sense of the ephemeral that seems intrinsic to media draws upon the melancholia lurking in Baudelaire's notion of modernity, and concerns the vulnerable state of its materiality. Although celluloid, magnetic tape and vinyl disks have not yet been put to the test of time that stone, paper and the pigments of antiquity have survived, it seems clear from archival authorities that contemporary media are transitory. Far fewer than one hundred years have been sufficient to demonstrate the instability of celluloid nitrate; fewer than fifty for the pink color in Eastman Color; and fewer than twenty for the oxidation of magnetic tape. The 'ideal' life-span suggested by archivists for the supporting media for digital information are nearly as short as the life of the ever-changing formats into which that data is encoded. Our media, as physical objects subject to wear, tear, reformatting and ultimately decay, are fleeting in ways that we are only now beginning to realize.

A third sense in which the ephemeral is endemic to media can be found in the ways that we study it. Historically, before the era of consumer-grade tape recorders, film and television scholars had to rely on what was broadcast or screened (or could be found at the archive). The very contours of a culture's productivity were subject to shape-shifting and change thanks to the happenstance of preservation, the legal and market opportunities of distribution, the state of the larger media environment, and of course one's location within it. Beyond the aleatory (or, alternatively, canonical) availability of texts, their very mode of survival and storage also revealed limits. Consider, for example, the nature of what is considered worth saving. Every medium has its challenges, but the archive's radical de-contextualization of television, in which programs are plucked from their local setting and textual mix, from the flow that Raymond Williams did so much to excavate, stands as an example of the medium's ephemeral status. We only have access to certain aspects of programming, the larger textual logics of program flow, of advertising, program idents and bumpers, having long since vanished without a trace. And this has shaped the ways that we study, for example, television, attending to the feature texts that survive and are accessible, and removing them from their flow.

The OED reminds us that the fleeting temporal qualities of the term ephemeral have, over time, taken on other meanings as well. The Additions Series (1993) offers this definition:

ephemeron, *n.* *pl.* **ephemera**. Printed matter of no lasting value except to collectors, as tickets, posters, greetings cards, etc. **1938** *Proc. Special Libraries Assoc.* I. 55 (*heading*) Pamphlets and ephemera. **1943** *Gloss. Libr. Terms* (Amer. Libr. Assoc.) 53 *Ephemera*. 1. Current material, usually pamphlets and clippings, of temporary interest and value. 2. Similar material of the past which has acquired literary or historical significance. **1956** *Library* Sept. 8 (Advt.), Catalogues offering rare and interesting books, pamphlets and ephemera post free. **1973** M. AMIS *Rachel Papers* 126 Faddy ephemera covered its walls: posters of Jimi Hendrix, Auden and Isherwood, Rasputin....

A reminder of why the OED is such an interesting read, the undulating and accreting definitions and uses of the term reveal evidence of its cultural dynamics (Hendrix, Isherwood, Rasputin?). The combination of 'material of the past which has acquired literary and historical significance' with 'printed matter of no lasting value' to describe the same term speaks to its uneasy dynamics, at once both valuable and valueless, and very much dependant on the eye of the beholder. The category of objects enumerated – tickets, greeting cards – also suggests that the temporary value of the ephemeral is related to multiplicity. Objects of this sort are created in such abundance that they are rarely valued beyond their initial use; they are among the first bits of material culture to find their way to the dustbin of history. Not surprisingly, this sense is more recent (as the OED quotes demonstrate), reflecting the modern as a moment of mass reproduction. In a sense, it is one of the unspoken critiques behind the lament for the *auratic* taken on by Benjamin. The point here is that the notion of abundance through multiplicity renders the status of any one particular instance insignificant – at least until such time as scarcity restores its importance.

The lurking implication of multiplicity's relationship to the ephemeral plays out in a particular way with time-based media, namely as repetition. The more frequently repeated, the more multiple, the more the value of any one instance might be considered fleeting, ephemeral. This is the domain excavated by Williams in his meso- and micro-level analyses of televisual flow, a domain absent from the newspaper listings of the evening's programming, absent in the archiving of the primary program text, ... but perhaps not completely absent from our experience.

VI [Channel 7 news desk] (Announcer 2)

A mayor in Alameda County is working for a proposition to ban further apartment construction in his city. But his wife and six daughters are working for the other side. Reporter (film of street in city; cars and houses): The proposition is being voted on tomorrow. The issue is legal and environmental. Further development, it is said, will reduce open spaces and lead to extra traffic pollution.

VII *Woman (film: hand-spraying from can; table dusted). Liquid Gold furniture polish; brings new sparkle to your furniture; it's like meeting an old friend again.*

VIII *Man (film clip): The 6:30 movie is Annie Get Your Gun. Betty Hutton as the sharpest –shooting gal the Wild West ever saw (Williams, 1992: 95).*

This excerpt from Raymond Williams' 'medium range' analysis of a broadcast sequence from San Francisco's Channel 7 on 12 March 1973 (5:42pm) traces a series of shifts in time, space, voice, and mode of address.¹ From a live news desk, to a presumably recently filmed location report, to an 'evergreen' studio-shot advertisement, to a clip from George Sidney's 1950 film with a recent voice overlay, a few seconds of television time yields quite an experiential range. While read as 'disruptive' to a cultural outsider like Williams, the sequence flows along quite well for native viewers. Williams' close-range analysis goes a step further, demonstrating the art of segue so important in the broadcast era. While not discussed by Williams, who was more interested in perceived temporal continuities, the repetition and recycling of these elements further complicates the story. Texts, as cultural artifacts, carry associations, so how might we think about the repositioning of those elements (texts and their associations) into new contexts? The 1973 broadcast of a 1950 film might come inscribed with particular meanings for a viewer who first saw it at the cinema 23 years earlier; or, repositioned in a broadcast environment where the promo for *Annie Get Your Gun* follows a report of a shooting by a woman, it might take on a whole new meaning. The advertisement for Liquid Gold might normalize domestic divisions of labor in 1973, or shown in a different era, might be appreciated for documenting early 1970s lifestyles or critiqued as an instrument for maintaining gender inequality. While hypothetical examples, they point to the role of sequence, context and association in the construction of meaning, and the tensions inherent in ordering and reordering the bits of time, space and event that they constitute.

This recombinatory practice, built on an ever-changing sequence of program units many of which are ephemeral in the sense of being both fleeting and repeated, is difficult to recover from newspaper listings or television archives. And yet, it reflects the logics of most western television systems, while also relating to the idea of montage. The durational assemblage of divergent materials, montage relies upon sequence and ever-changing context for its effect. In cinematic terms, the principles of montage found early articulation through Lev Kuleshov, briefly the teacher of Eisenstein and a great influence on Pudovkin, Vertov and other Soviet filmmakers. Just after the Russian revolution, at a time of minimal film imports and poor production resources, Kuleshov experimented with the recombinatory effect of film editing, recutting found footage to construct new meanings. By intercutting footage of an actor's face with a bowl of soup, a coffin, and a girl, he was able to construct a nuanced performance for audiences who read identical images of the actor's face as expressing hunger, loss, and quiet joy. The 'Kuleshov effect,' as the results of this and other experiments became known, demonstrated that shot sequence and context were far more determining than expected, and that the meaning of a particular shot, long considered self-evident and relatively stable within the painterly and photographic tradition, was in fact highly malleable and context dependant.

Kuleshov's insights gave voice to a temporal recombinatory practice that is older than the film medium, evident for example in 19th century programming of magic lantern exhibitions, where showmen learned to build – and to rework -- stories from the slides that they happened to have. But these early practices, particularly as they appeared through film's first decade or so, actually made use of recombinatory logic in a double sense. First, in the hands of filmmakers such as Edwin S. Porter and D. W. Griffith, the sequence of shots was manipulated to construct overall textual meaning (just as Kuleshov would later theorize and experimentally demonstrate). Second, the positioning of Porter's, Griffith's, and others' films into full programs (complete with lantern slides, actualites, and other narratives) could itself radically transform the meanings of individual films. Here, the programmer (usually the projectionist) could, through simple manipulation of film sequence, comment upon or build different frameworks of coherence for a particular film. This meta-level of recombination was not discussed by Kuleshov, and indeed, largely took residual form in exhibition practice. But it *was* seized upon by television (and radio), where programmatic recombination would emerge as the economic lifeblood of the industry in the form of the re-run. And it provides one of the keys to television's distinctive deployment of ephemeral program elements

Television's programming logics turn on a triad of organizational principles when it comes to texts, ephemeral and not: sequence, interpenetration and repetition.

- *Sequence* pertains to the careful orchestration of program units particularly relevant during the broadcast era programming (but residually present as well in its successor regimes), in which the program day addressed a changing constituency of viewers, and in which the program 'line-up' was designed to enhance the chances of continuous viewing. Sequence, as well, speaks to the notion of temporal contiguity and thus contextualization that is the driving force of both the Kuleshov effect and programmatic historical framing (and in this, it remains highly relevant, even for the self-programmer of *YouTube* segments).
- *Interpenetration* can be found in the practice of parsing out particular texts over time and over the broadcast schedule (eg., weekly or daily series, where the program day and our lives are interpenetrated) and of fragmenting individual programs with advertisements and announcements of various sorts, effectively constructing a meta-text beyond the control of the individual text's author. Far more egregious in commercial television settings, interpenetration also refers to the practice of using program 'bumpers' and 'hooks' (displaced micro-program elements) to keep viewers watching. The effect, paradoxically, is both to rupture engagement in a particular program and to interconnect program elements into a larger whole. But the punctuation of program sequence is not always subtle: a well-timed advertisement for aspirin during the evening news can undercut the most serious economic reports, as can an unfortunately timed advertisement for gasoline following news of the latest evidence of global warming.
- *Repetition* refers to the recycling of footage, programs and program units, whether in a single channel environment or across channels. Examples range from heavily circulated iconic footage (the collapse of the World Trade Center), to advertisements (where frequency of repetition is part of their persuasive logic), to program segments (CNN Headline News' repetition of news stories and sequences on a 30-minute rotation), to entire program reruns (whether repeated or syndicated).²

While interpenetration and repetition may seem at odds with an ideal viewing experience, they are central to the notion of television as a larger textual system (as opposed to 'television as the provider of individual program texts'). Moreover, they bear heavily on the (re-) construction of textual meaning and reflect the current state of television's economy. Interpenetration brings textual elements of a different temporality

and intent into the primary textual domain. They can be assimilated as part of a larger text (an aspirin ad can be read as inadvertently commenting upon the latest bad news from Afghanistan), or bracketed out as a minor annoyance (and ignored), but in either case they redefine the temporality of the primary text and thus the viewing experience and meanings. Repetition, in turn, invariably takes place in a new cultural present, and can reactivate the past of the primary text (recalling original impressions upon first seeing the program or, through the text, its fuller cultural moment), or recast it through the knowledge that has since been acquired.

The already alluded to notion of flow, one of the most developed discursive strands in television studies, touches directly upon this point. Closely associated with Raymond Williams' path-breaking contribution to the study of television, the concept has gone on to support very different arguments, and in the process, has helped both to chart shifts in the identity of television as a cultural practice and to map various undulations in the terrain of television studies (Williams, 1974; Gripsrud, 1998; Uricchio, 2004). It has been deployed perhaps most consistently in the service of defining a televisual 'essence', adhering to Williams' description of flow as "perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as technology and as a cultural form" (Williams, 1992/1974: 80). It has been used to describe the structure of textuality and programming on macro, meso, and micro levels. And it has given form to the viewing experience, serving as a framework within which reception can be understood (variously activated in terms of larger household regimes and the logics of meaning-making).

The disjunctions, discontinuities and endless recombinatory possibilities of flow lead to a medium-specific dimension of television's (meta-)textual production, and thus its particular manner of encouraging meaning-making. This process works in tandem with the textual units, both ephemeral and not, constructed by program makers – documentaries, dramatic fictions, advertisements, news, program bumpers, promos, idents – effectively transforming any particular text's original meaning and epistemological status. My point is relatively straight-forward: although something like the associational logic captured by 'the Kuleshov effect' is axiomatic when we think about the grammar of time-based texts and the manner in which individual shots accrete into meaningful utterances, our approaches to the study of television have usually failed to extend these insights into the relationship of program elements to one another. Instead, we (and our archives) tend to focus on individual texts, plucked from their environment, stripped of their framing context, freed from notions of repetition or interpenetration or larger program sequence, and exempted from any consideration of the particular heterochronic regime of which they are a part. As a result, television texts are analyzed very much like film texts; and while for the better part of the post WW2 era, we have abandoned the notion of stable meanings, we have for too long assumed the existence of the stable and unitized television text somehow plucked from its program flow. This approach has of course yielded a wide range of insights; and yet, particularly when we are considering how texts help to situate meanings, the larger heterochronic dimension is also vitally important. It helps to account for the variable status of a particular shot or program, and for the embedding of ever shifting bits of recorded time into new contexts. Television's complex temporality renders it into a generator of endlessly reworked meanings. And central to this complexity are the most frequently repeated program units – those texts that we call ephemeral.

The recurrent

Television's configurations of technology and cultural form have morphed over time. The situation today is indeed quite different from that of the broadcasting era that formed the basis for Williams' notion of flow, and the medium's broad definitional contours remain very much in a state of contention. Yet television –

even when distributed through the Internet -- has maintained its roots in the twin definitional logics of a particular representational order and temporal order ('live' in the sense of potentially immediate, continuous, and co-existent). And more than simply changing, these televisual configurations have accreted, and exist side by side: for example, it is still possible to view programmer-dominated, broadcast-like television over the Internet, still possible to experience 'old' cable, and at the same time, experience new DVR- or IPTV-enhanced television flow. Yet, particularly if we listen to supporters of the traditional television industry, these new affordances seem to be eroding the very essence of the medium by enabling viewers to 'cherry-pick', jumping from text to text in precisely the sequence that they desire, and allowing them with the push of a button to circumvent the ephemeral in the form of advertisements, idents, and promos. The essence of the medium for these critics is often economic, and the erosion is one that affects the logics of television advertising and audience metrics. Yet ever since the popularization of the remote control -- and its coeval, the VCR -- audiences have been able to renegotiate the sequence of program flow and flummox the audience metrics bean counters. Leaving aside these economic concerns, what about the meta-textual implications of these new affordances? What about flow and the place of ephemeral texts?

Contemporary viewers enjoy several affordances unavailable to earlier generations. *Access* to content continues to expand greatly, with global television increasingly coming on line and massive archival digitization projects increasing access to the televisual (and filmic) past. *Agency* is also shifting, and to more than one model: we are becoming much more dependent on program metadata and on search engines, and can see increasing signs that social recommendation systems will play an important role in how we imagine navigating the medium. At the same time, the blurring of producers and users, and the active distribution of the results, promise even greater variation of content. Most importantly, users can control the flow of program elements, constructing contexts and playing with the ensuing meanings. Together, these affordances in the areas of access and agency enable viewers to look beyond their regions or nations, accessing the world from outside a viewing position long-controlled by national institutions and transnational industries. Audiences can find new compilers of texts, new sites of accretion, new pathways, as they navigate a rich mix of program possibilities, either refashioning their own texts or recombining contexts and causal sequences of texts to express new meanings. The shift underway is from the art of selection (the broadcast and cable eras) to the art of aggregation, and the far more active reassembly of sequence. And if we complicate this by factoring in the increasing importance of cross-platform prowling, the possibilities are daunting.

As television -- a medium with a long history of entanglements with other media, from the telephone to film to the radio -- continues its latest *pas de deux* with the networked computer, the direction of flow is changing. In our online world, we read *and* write; we download *and* uplink; we consume *and* 'cut and paste' and produce. *YouTube* emblemizes this participatory turn (and television's increasingly close relationship with the Internet), and its implications for the ephemeral in television go far beyond the simple 'evacuation' and evasion feared by the industry.³ Although mainstream television is flirting ever more intently with user-generated content (*America's Funniest Home Videos*, *BBC's Video Diaries*, and citizen journalism forms such as *CNN: I-Reports*), much *YouTube* content is predicated upon the viewer/user's reappropriation and recontextualization of existing televisual and film material. Feature programs, advertisements, idents, bumpers and so on are disassembled, recycled, remixed with materials of other provenance, and recast as new texts -- some funny, some absurd, some biting in their commentary. In many cases, the ephemeral has come all the way around to emerge center stage. And sites such as *YouTube* provide outlets for their distribution, for further recycling, and for commentary. As we consider the accretion of videos around new topics, and the pace of user remixing and sequence intervention, we are witnessing nothing less than the emergence of a new production system

generated within communities of interest, not nation states or corporations. And as often as not, the textual forms considered ephemeral in a commercial setting are the building blocks of these new textual systems.

The Internet has enabled this process to a large extent, as *YouTube's* centrality and the new affordances offered to communities of interest suggest. But the major American broadcasting and cable television networks have also played their parts, thanks to their own on-line operations, in many cases positioned under the umbrella of their trans-media parent companies. CBS Interactive, Fox Interactive Media, Turner (CNN, TNT, TBS, Cartoon Network), and Viacom Digital (MTV, BET, Paramount), plus industry-backed portals such as Hulu (NBC Universal and News Corp.), offer a spectrum of services from providing scheduling information, to channeling fan activities, to providing various levels of access to television shows, films, and music. Other portals such as *Joost* provide an international assortment of television, film and music, and sites such as Mysoju take a more nation- and genre-specific approach, offering access to unlicensed Japanese, Korean and Taiwanese soaps. Although the interfaces and services provided by these various sites differ widely, several things stand out. First, the online presence of disaggregated television content has been normalized and is growing steadily; second, virtually all mainstream American television programs have been spoken for by their parent companies, and at a moment of aggressive intellectual property protection, this leaves very little for outside players such as *YouTube* and *Joost*; third, ephemeral texts are alive and well, both stimulated by these developments and deployed in very different ways.

If the networks are largely monopolizing their own television content, then what kind of television is left over for *YouTube*? *YouTube* of course has licensing deals with CBS, BBC, and many others, but deals do not necessarily mean feature television programs. CBS, for example, allows access to a range of promotional and ephemeral material (interviews, previews, program headers, logos, advertisements), and some historical shows, news and local affiliate coverage – but not its current features. *YouTube* has responded to these constraints by launching what it calls ‘short-form content’: clips of popular prime-time shows like *Lost*, *Desperate Housewives* and *Grey's Anatomy*, in which the feature program is rendered into something that looks ephemeral, as well as behind-the-scenes footage, celebrity interviews, online-only specials. Considering these constraints, *YouTube* is not a destination for the viewer seeking standard television fare or formats. But for the trans-brand or trans-network fan, the synoptic viewer, the lover of ephemera, and the growing cohort of young cell-phone viewers, it is fast providing an array of alternatives from new textual forms to community-building strategies, all consistent with its user-driven profile. In an ironic twist, the networks have effectively encouraged a new prominence and value for the ephemeral thanks to their constraint of feature programming.

A telling instance of this ‘twist’ may be found in *YouTube's* embrace of another medium: film. From the echoes of cinema style theatrical release, to format-specific appeals to the amateur movement, to film festivals, the development teams at *YouTube* work through familiar categories while in fact offering far more than simply the main event – the film artifact itself. In many cases, they offer everything *but* the artifact itself. Consider *YouTube's* promotional blurb for The Sundance Film Festival:

The Sundance Film Festival recently launched a *YouTube* channel that allows all of you movie enthusiasts to get a glimpse of what took place during the 25th anniversary year of the influential festival. For those of you interested in the filmmakers behind the films, there's the “Meet the Artists” playlist, featuring interviews with filmmakers from around the world and clips of the films that brought them to Sundance. If you're looking for coverage on the ground – from premieres to parties and more – you can check out the Live@Sundance segments. And to hear what some of the film industry's leading thinkers had to say about the state of the business today (YouTube.com/blog 23 January 2009).

Although in most cases we are only given access to ‘clips of the films that brought them to Sundance’, the trappings, the ephemera, of the festival constitute the main *YouTube* event and are covered in their full glory. Just as in the example of its ‘short-form’ approach to mainstream television, *YouTube* has seized the periphery, providing access to the ‘scene’ far more effectively than to the films (or television shows) themselves. *YouTube*’s game channels operate in similar fashion. Games, by definition interactive, are watchable rather than playable in the *YouTube* context. The various channels provide walkthroughs, commentaries, trailers, previews, sneak peeks, cheats, play highlights and event coverage across the various gaming platforms. These elements are the topic of much commentary, effectively reinforcing the community-building strategies that seem to lurk behind the event coverage ‘peripheral’ to television shows and films.

Conclusion

Intellectual property constraints have led to a new centrality for the ephemeral, at once driven by the evacuation of the primary text in settings like *YouTube* and by a participatory turn, which remixes and recirculates the texts to which it has easy access. Moreover, current trends suggest that feature programming itself is subject to a process of *ephemerization*, as programs are cut down to teaser-size for the small screen with the blessings of their network producers (and protectors). As viewing platforms continue to decenter the traditional television-set-in-the-living-room, shifting instead towards smaller, more mobile and interactive screens, one can imagine that this trend will continue to intensify.

This essay has argued that the ephemeral and media are inexorably intertwined, certainly if we step back and consider nature of our experiential encounters with time-based media, and their archival lives and after-lives as objects of study. In a more particular sense we have seen that in traditional television regimes, ephemeral texts are an essential part of programming flow, and as such offer a determining if far too often overlooked framework for the interpretive act. The *frisson* of text against text offers a site of contextualization and potential meaning production and as such offers a meta-textual process worthy of closer critical attention.

As television enters a phase of displacement and disaggregation, with its texts unbundled from the flow that has defined the medium for the greater part of its last 75 years, the ephemeral has found a new place. At least during this transitional moment, several factors are at play. Television’s traditional industries, panicked by fast changes in technology, audience behaviors, and the underlying economic logics of their sector, are holding tight to their intellectual property rights as they struggle to reinvent their business model. A new generation of digitally-enabled collectors and archivists have opened access to vast collections of ephemeral material and extra-national television texts. And new participatory communities have discovered the pleasures of producing and sharing their own texts, and in an era where a cut-and-mix aesthetic enjoys widespread support, this has encouraged the recycling and recirculating of existing – often ephemeral -- textual elements.

The ephemeral has found new life as television struggles to redefine itself and its relationship to the people once called its audience. At a moment when the capacities, sizes and locations of our screens continue to change, certainties are elusive. But it seems clear that textual formats and viewing habits are responding to this new environment, and that short form time-based media are on the rise. Whether or not we will continue to call these forms ‘television’ is anyone’s guess, but they suggest both a continued slippage between the clearly defined textual forms that we today take for granted, and an increased value for the forms that we take as ephemeral.

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¹ This section 'recombines' elements developed for a related argument about television's relationship with history first published as Uricchio, 2010.

² Derek Kompare offers an excellent overview of this practice (Kompare, 2005).

³ True, most of the actions that I will describe circumvent the existing system for profit production based on viewing advertisements, but that says more about the accounting system than the logics of textual engagement. This section draws from arguments developed in Uricchio, 2009.