

## TV AS TIME MACHINE

Television's changing heterochronic regimes  
and the production of history

*William Uricchio*

Most of the existing scholarly literature on television texts focuses on particular programmes. This chapter, however, will consider television's dynamics as a larger textual composite. At a moment when, to invoke Raymond Williams, television's technology and cultural form are very much in transition, the medium's fast-changing textual mix and our access to it merit closer consideration. In considering this mix, I will focus on a particular aspect of television's temporality that in effect makes it a time machine, allowing viewers to experience a distinctive kind of time, and possibly even notion of history. Television's temporal regime has been in flux since the start of the broadcast era, and I am interested above all in how changing configurations of time and the (re-)sequencing of programming units themselves constitute key elements of the medium's relationship to historical representation. I am interested in using medium-specific attributes to explore television's changing role as a site for the personal construction of historical meaning and as a vehicle for public history. Although the broad contours of this short narrative – the shift over the past 60 years from relatively stable and widespread textual sequences to highly variable and personalized constellations – will not be surprising, by limiting my focus to the interplay of certain televisual logics, I hope to at least shed some light on an under-illuminated aspect of television's historical capacities.

### Narrowing the field

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 [1974][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. 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 recycling of these elements further complicates the story. Texts, as cultural artefacts, 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 labour 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. For better or worse, the English word 'history' suffers from semantic ambiguity, referring among other things to the events of the past as well as to the meanings and emplotted representations of those events from a later point in time; both to the infinity of detail bound up in any one occurrence and to the inherently partial rendering and interpretation of that occurrence; both to history as inexorably shackled to the particularities of time and place, and to history as the violent repositioning and recontextualization of the past to reflect the needs of the present. Although we can explore television's

relationship with history through any number of lenses, including those used for other audio-visual media, I contend that its distinction as a historical medium – and as a time machine of sorts – may be found in its constant remix of representational and temporal elements. Television's audio-visual relationship to past events (the *resemblance* that it shares with photography, film and recorded audio – and its status as *trace*, which distinguishes it from the printed word) (Kittler 1999) is complicated by its distinctive engagement with time, characterized by the 'liveness' effect (Bourdon 2000) (*immediate, continuous and co-existent*).

Much ink has been spilled on the notion of representation in the *pas de deux* of television and history. However, the more medium-specific notions of the 'liveness effect' and televisual flow have either been absent from such discussions or have formed the basis for critique. Television, so the argument goes, contributes to a *loss* of history because 'liveness' and 'flow' keep the viewer trapped in an endless unfolding of a (simulated) present, too interested by what comes next to ever reflect upon deeper sets of connections; television effectively flattens the appearances of the past into the ongoing fabric of the present. This view recalls the notion of distraction associated with late-nineteenth-century urbanization and modernity and articulated in very different ways by critics such as Benjamin (1936), Horkheimer and Adorno (1947), this time as a condition of the medium's existence (a problem already hinted at in 1935 by one of television's earliest observers, Rudolf Arnheim [1935][1969]). A few, including Arnheim, have even argued that the very terms of television's encounter with the world ('live' iconic and indexical representations) are the source of its undoing. This argument, the 'seeing is believing' critique, claims that television falsely empowers its viewers, encouraging them to equate what they see 'with their own eyes' through the medium with what they experience in the world, blurring the line between two experiential domains and encouraging viewers to feel that they 'know' what they have only partially seen.

Superficiality, distraction and confusion, it seems, emerge from a medium that by its nature and cultural logics is nothing short of anti-historical. If we add to this television's reach as a popular representation system and the scale of its viewing public, the implications of these various concerns can be quite dramatic, even dangerous. Several scholars, however, have gone against the grain, using these same issues to demonstrate television's importance as a site of history. For example, John Ellis (1999) has argued that television provides 'a vast mechanism' for processing the raw data of daily life into narrativized and coherent forms, while Paddy Scannell (1966, 2004), attending to broadcasting's temporal regime, has made a compelling case for the relevance of 'mediated subjectivity' to modern historical consciousness. These and other scholars have explored the implications of television's temporality – the way, for instance, that broadcasting (including radio) is not just 'live' in the sense of immediate but also in the sense of an 'always

already present' that can punctuate anything that is being broadcast (including recorded material), and in the sense that television's co-existent, continuous, 24/7 feed renders the medium into something like an accomplice, companion and ongoing reference point. These factors greatly complicate the simple airing of historical texts by situating their meaning, qualifying the status of any particular programme, and bearing on the very construction of subjectivity.

### The time of television

*Heterochronia* describes that aspect of television's temporality that accounts for its specificity as a medium, distinguishing it from other textual engagements with history. The term heterochronia traditionally refers to certain medical pathologies characterized by irregular or intermittent times (the pulse), or erratic developmental sequence (organ growth). This notion of displacements in time or the vitiating of sequence was picked up by Foucault as something of a temporal extension of his notion of *heterotopia*. This latter term denotes for Foucault sites with a multiplicity of meanings, defined by uncertainty, paradox, incongruity and ambivalence; sites for which he suggested a temporal corollary (heterochronia) best exemplified by long-term accumulation projects such as libraries and museums (Foucault [1966]1970, 1998). Evocative as much for its weak definitional status as for its promise, heterochronia is a term I would like to define between its diagnostic roots (the vitiating of sequence, displacements in time) and Foucault's institutional setting. Like a library or museum, 'a place of all times that is itself outside of time', television is a temporal aggregate, an accumulation of visions, tastes, forms and ideas gathered together into one place (Foucault 1998: 182). Like a museum or library, television is a space of endlessly recombinatory artefacts. Unlike them, however, and this is a crucial distinction from Foucault's meaning, television's recombinatory process plays out as a linear sequence *over time*, not outside it.

Consider the difference between collage and montage: a similar principle (the compositing of differently sourced artefacts) works to a very different effect along a durational axis. Collage radically uproots and recombines visual elements from various provenances and with different histories. The resulting whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and many collages exploit the dissonance of source, materiality and referenced temporality to great effect. But montage, the *durational* assemblage of divergent materials, 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, recurring 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 shot content and meaning, long considered self-evident and relatively stable within the painterly and photographic tradition, were in fact highly malleable.

Kuleshov's insights gave voice to a temporal recombinatory practice that is older than the film medium, evident for example in nineteenth-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 programmes (complete with lantern slides, actualities 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 (a routine programme with previews, a short or two and the feature). 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 rerun. And it provides one of the keys to television's distinctive engagement with history.

Libraries and museums are heterochronic both in the sense of latency (their collections reflect acquisitions drawn from very different times) and the activity they engender (the practice of browsing, of encountering chance sequences of texts produced over different times, of wandering and thus activating very different contexts and meanings). But they differ from television in several ways: in terms of the fullness of their potential latency (television's temporality is of necessity active, and even though choices must be made, televisual flow is unstoppable); and, at least during the broadcast era, in terms of the agency that structures sequence (the programmer rather than the individual browser or flâneur) and in terms of the public scale of the experience (mass rather than individual). We shall shortly consider the profound transformations of the structure of television's temporality and audiences (and thus the logics of television's heterochronic regime) symbolized by the remote control device and digital access systems such as TiVo and IPTV.

Heterochronia, in the sense of displacements in time or the vitiating of sequence, is a televisual constant, and it can be found on many different levels. As just suggested, it drives the textual logic of individual programmes (à la Kuleshov), and enjoys variation across programme and genre forms, from news to drama, from argument to chronicle. But there is something more to televisual heterochronia. Its programme logics turn on a triad of elements: sequence, interpenetration and repetition.

- *Sequence* pertains to the careful orchestration particularly relevant during broadcast-era programming (but residually present as well in its successor regimes), in which the programme day addressed a changing constituency of viewers, and in which the programme '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 programmes over time and over the broadcast schedule (e.g. weekly or daily series, where the programme day and our lives are interpenetrated) and of fragmenting individual programmes 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 programme 'bumpers' and 'hooks' (displaced micro-programme elements) to keep viewers watching. The effect, paradoxically, is both to rupture engagement with a particular programme and to interconnect programme elements into a larger whole. But the punctuation of programme 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, programmes and programme 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 programme segments (CNN Headline News' repetition of news stories and sequences on a 30-minute rotation), to entire programme reruns (whether repeated or syndicated).

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 programme 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, serving variously to reactivate the past of the primary text (recalling original impressions upon first seeing the programme or, through the text, its fuller cultural moment), or to recast it through the knowledge that has since been acquired. In this context, Marx's (1942) opening words in 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' (Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.) take on new meaning.

### Technology and cultural form

If some televisual images have an epistemological slipperiness about them, sliding from trace of a historical event to a historical interpretation of that event (and positions in between), the temporal situation of those images would seem to play a crucial role in fixing and holding them fast (even if only momentarily). I've suggested that the notion of heterochronia helps us here, by calling attention to television's pervasive fabric of displaced and recombinatory temporalities. Heterochronia helps us to account for something like the Kuleshov effect, except played out not only within the programme text but on a meta-textual, 'televisual' dimension as well. Ever-changing sequences of images and programmes selectively activate the uncertainty, paradox, incongruity and ambivalence of any one text within it. An awareness of televisual heterochronia helps us to explore the role of sequence, interpenetration and the repetition and recombination of programmes and programme elements as *themselves* constituting sites of meaning-making. This is not to suggest that producers' intended meanings are completely evacuated or overwritten by the meta-textual flow of programme sequence; rather, it is to argue that the medium's particular form of heterochronia plays an important and potentially determining role in conceptually framing any given text. Because these processes play themselves out with displaced, irregular and ever-changing temporal elements, they are particularly well suited to generate tensions (and meanings) of a historical nature. The interpenetration of particular programme units can frame a particular programme unit as historical artefact; or it can reframe an orthodox historical interpretation, fundamentally changing its reading. The friction between programme units – ever-changing with regard to sequence and lived historical context (in the case of programme repetition) – is itself a key element in the construction of history.

So, as previously stated, in contrast to the library with its latent form of heterochronia, television's recombinatory structures necessarily play out over time. Our access to that time, however, is very much in flux, complicating easy generalizations. Although televisual time has certain distinguishing characteristics (*immediate, continuous and co-existent*), the actual textures and experiences of these characteristics are themselves historically contingent. In order to help specify the kinds of recombinatory practices that television and its viewers engage in – the key elements, after all, in the medium's historical claim – we need to understand the broad trends in television's technologies, programme sequencing and user interfaces.

The notion of flow, one of the most developed discursive strands in television studies, touches directly upon this point (see Uricchio 2004). 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 (see Williams [1974]1992; 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 [1974]1992: 8). 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).

I would like to call upon this concept because it offers a concise way to locate the changing contours of the televisual *dispositif*, that is the historically specific constellation of technologies, logics and practices that constitute the medium. Roughly speaking, we can distinguish three periods, the first of which is the television-broadcast era, which began in most Western nations around 1950 and, at least in the US, ended in the mid- to late 1970s shortly after Williams published his book. Williams experienced a form of broadcast television largely dependent on limited VHF and UHF transmissions, with between three to six channels available in most urban American markets. Viewed over television sets that required manual tuning (and often manipulation of the antenna), conditions were ripe for the dominance of the television programmer, who orchestrated a continuous flow of texts, keeping viewers pinned to their seats. Scarcity also meant that America's 'big three' broadcasting companies enjoyed massive audience share, and that broadcasting could work in the service of a consensual project. Programme sequence was essentially under the control of the broadcasters, with viewers having few other options at their disposal. And with controlled sequence and few other options, the broadcast era was characterized by a finely crafted,

relatively stable and largely programmer-defined heterochronic order of the sort analysed by Williams.

By the mid- to late 1970s, change was in the air. New regulations for the diffusion of cable service transformed cable from a community service into a business. Meanwhile, the Domestic Communication Satellite Rules allowed private satellite distribution, ending the monopoly of the Communications Satellite Corporation. Time Incorporated's Home Box Office, Ted Turner's Atlanta independent WTCG and Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network, to mention but three of the cable operators that expanded exponentially in the late 1970s and early 1980s, grew in the space provided by these regulatory changes. On the programming front, new opportunities for the recycling of old broadcast (and film) texts proliferated as cable stations sought ways to fill air-time, and television's economic logics increasingly turned to syndication, reruns and endless self-reference (Kompare 2005). Old classics found new contexts, whether through happenstance or programming strategies – from thematic packaging like the History Channel to *Nick at Nite's* recasting of classics as camp (Spigel 2001). The videocassette recorder (VCR) also entered the American home in rapidly increasing numbers, effectively unshackling viewers from television programmers' sequencing logics.

The widespread appearance of the remote control device (RCD) emblemizes this era. It stands in synergetic relation to the radical increase in television channels, the availability of cable and satellite service, and the introduction of the VCR, with 'the click of a button' facilitating viewer mobility among the 'older' broadcasts and the 'newer' programming sources. And, most importantly, it signals a shift away from the programming-based notion of flow that Williams described, to a viewer-centred model. In this new regime – the era of 'narrowcasting' – not only was the once mass audience fragmented, but it gained a greater degree of agency in arranging its own programme sequence, in shaping its own patterns of interpenetration (zapping through advertisements, switching channels) and, thanks to the VCR, in defining its own course of programme repetition and recycling. Indeed, the breakup of the mass audience and the rise of more robust forms of individual agency seem implicit in one another. With the shift in agency from the network's programmer to the individual, and with greater control over television's recombinatory potentials, a new experience of television's underlying temporality – and heterochronic potentials – was born.

Today, the affordances of digitalization have radically displaced control and sequence. Control has shifted to an independent sector composed of meta-data programmers and filtering technologies (variously constructed as search engines in the case of IPTV and adaptive interfaces in the case of intelligent DVR-based systems such as TiVo). The ability of viewers to exercise their own agency over programme sequence – and even textual production and distribution – has greatly increased. Thanks to intensified

convergence and the television medium's own shift from over-the-air broadcasting to a variety of alternate carriers (cable, satellite, video-on-demand systems and the internet), content has been loosened from any particular distribution model. The results of digitalization can be seen in new kinds of interfaces between viewer and programme such as TiVo, in internet protocol distribution systems and video portals such as Hulu and YouTube.

The overarching trend from the early 1950s to the present seems clear: from television as a one-way, coherent, programmer-controlled flow to television as bidirectional, fragmented, user-controlled experience; from mass audiences to atomized viewers; from a site of public memorialization to an increasingly personal site of private and public expression. This fabric of changes has left unchallenged television's temporal characteristics of immediacy and continuity, but it has fundamentally transformed the experience of sequence, interpenetration and repetition. The shifts in agency, in scale and directionality have significant implications for the concept and experience of televisual heterochronia ... and wider cultural implications in terms of public memory.

### The future of television history

I have argued that the disjunctions, discontinuities and endless recombination (meta-)textual production, and thus of meanings ... and, potentially, historical meanings. This process works in tandem with the textual units constructed by programme-makers – documentaries, dramatic fictions, advertisements, news, programme bumpers, promos – effectively transforming any particular text's original meaning and epistemological status. My point is relatively straightforward: 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 programme elements to one another. Instead, we (and our archives) tend to focus on individual texts, plucked from their environment, stripped of their advertisements and framing context, freed from notions of repetition or interpenetration or larger programme sequence, and exempted from any consideration of the particular heterochronic regime of which they are a part. As a result, television texts are analysed very much like film texts; and while we have long since abandoned the notion of stable meanings, we have for too long assumed the existence of the stable text. This approach has of course yielded a wide range of insights; and yet, particularly when we are considering how texts – and how the medium generally – engages with history, the larger heterochronic dimension is also vitally important. It helps to account for the variable status of a particular shot or programme – either as history in the sense of interpretation

or as trace of the past – and for the embedding of ever-shifting bits of recorded time into new contexts. Television's complex temporality renders it into a history generator.

The twist regarding this general effect is that 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, with the medium's broad definitional contours 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, to experience new DVR-generated television flow.

And what about the latest reconfiguration of the medium? 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 enhancing access to the televisual (and filmic) past. *Agency* is also shifting, although to more than one model. We are becoming much more dependent on programme meta-data 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 programme 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, assessing the world from outside a long-controlled viewing position. They can ask how particular situations have evolved, and have the means to investigate the before and after of those developments. Historical memory has new compilers, new sites of accretion, new pathways, as users navigate a soup of textual 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* upload; we consume *and* 'cut and paste' *and* produce. YouTube, of course, emblemizes this

participatory turn (and television's increasingly close relationship with the internet), and I would like to close by briefly noting its implications for the television and history relationship (Uricchio 2009). 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. Indeed, many videos literalize the associative and often transgressive reading practices that I have been arguing are inherent in televisual heterochronia. Original programme texts are disassembled, recycled, remixed with materials of other provenance and recast as new texts. And YouTube provides a site for their distribution, for further recycling, and for commentary. I am not claiming that YouTube and its ilk are more or less historical in nature than earlier forms of television, but rather that their heterochronic order is accessible, manipulable and more capable of being reordered than earlier forms. They offer tangible evidence of the kinds of recombinatory reading practices that have long accompanied television's temporality. YouTube offers ample evidence of creative appropriation and recombination, whether we look to the thousands of short family histories that integrate interviews with photographs, film and video images clipped from the web, or the videos on world war, recast and remixed into new entities. As well, YouTube, as a larger composite of viewer-organized videos, offers users an opportunity to assess and assemble their own evidence and construct their own arguments regarding historical developments. As a heterochronic ensemble, the videos assembled under a rubric such as 'the Bay of Pigs' include diverse sources (interviews, Cuban-sourced footage, US propaganda, period news and advertisements, and so on) and temporalities that permit nuanced insights into the situation based on sources long unavailable to the US public. Not only do viewer-produced videos function as explicit forms of historical inscription, the very assemblages of clips under a particular rubric are capable of having historical potential.

My point here is to counter fears of the inevitability of social fragmentation. 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 grass-roots *lieux de mémoire*, places marked and commemorated by communities of interest, not nation states or national broadcasting companies. If we add to this process of accretion the many user comments that ensue, we have evidence of robust forms of 'bottom-up' historical engagement and meaning-making. In a world with historical re-enactors, amateur genealogists and local historians, the production of grass-roots history is nothing new. But the repurposing of televisual texts, their recombination and resequencing, suggests signs of a *critical* engagement and an acute awareness of the ambivalence and limits of historical evidence.

This participatory turn, even though it is by and large uncontrolled, undocumented, and unacceptable as professional scholarly history, would nevertheless seem to have advantages over the mere consumption of historical fare, sensitizing its lay practitioners to the pitfalls and challenges of representing and assessing the past. The end of history? No, just a new and potentially more active turn in its engagement by people who, when they watch television and embrace the heterochronic environment it provides, presumably deploy some of the same active, recombinatory logic.

### Note

1 A proviso is in order. Television's institutional practices tend to be culturally and historically specific in terms of programme source, mix and the manner in which that programming is presented (foreign texts dubbed in the US, subtitled in the Netherlands, read by a single voice in Poland). Such specificities have implications for the construction of public and collective memory. For reasons of brevity, I will be using US commercial television as my default.

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