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# **PART 1**

**MEDIA TRANSITION AND  
TRANSITORY MEDIA**



# 1

## The Recurrent, the Recombinatory and the Ephemeral

William Uricchio

Although America's film critics had mixed reviews of Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994), 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 forth 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 shots lasting one and two seconds. 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 a 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? Gérard Genette (2001) 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 contributions (and those of the generation of film-makers who studied with Lev Kuleshov) focused on the micro-level of shot-to-shot relations and their implications for the decentring 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 (Simpson and Weiner, 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 *Ephemeridæ* (Day-flies, May-flies).
- 2. transf. and fig.** One who or something which has a transitory existence.

The mayfly literalised the ancients' understanding of the transitory, granting it an iridescent form and fleeting yet pristine beauty that lingers on as an 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' (Baudelaire, 1964 [1864], p. 13). 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-nineteenth-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 realised. As viewers, we are poised on the cusp of the known and the unknown, and witness there the unfolding actualisation of near-infinite possibility into concrete images and sounds ... and meanings. This present, in which we ‘watch’ a film or television programme 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 programme 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 colour in Eastman Color; and fewer than twenty for the oxidation of magnetic tape. The ‘ideal’ lifespans 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 realise.

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 deemed worth saving. Every medium has

its challenges, but the archive's radical decontextualisation of television, in which programmes 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 programme flow, of advertising, programme 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 (Simpson and Weiner, 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 or 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 dependent 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 programme text ... but perhaps not completely absent from our experience.

## The recombinatory

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, p. 95)

This excerpt from Raymond Williams' 'medium range' analysis of a broadcast sequence from San Francisco's Channel 7 on 12 March 1973 (5:42 p.m.) traces a series of shifts in time, space, voice and mode of address.<sup>1</sup> 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 twenty-three 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 normalise 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.

This recombinatory practice, built on an ever-changing sequence of programme 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 film-makers. 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 dependent.

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 film-makers 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 theorise and experimentally demonstrate). Second, the positioning of the films of Porter, Griffiths and others into full programmes (complete with lantern slides, *actualités* 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 metalevel 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 rerun. And it provides one of the keys to television's distinctive deployment of ephemeral programme elements.

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

- *Sequence* pertains to the careful orchestration of programme units particularly relevant during the 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 contextualisation 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 (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 metatext 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 in 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 thirty-minute rotation), to entire programme reruns (whether repeated or syndicated).<sup>2</sup>

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 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, and can reactivate the past of the primary text (recalling original impressions upon first seeing the programme 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, 1992 [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], p. 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 programme-makers – documentaries, dramatic fictions, advertisements, news, programme bumpers, promos, idents – 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 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 for the better part of the post-World War Two era, we have abandoned the notion of stable meanings, we have for too long assumed the existence of the stable and unitised television text somehow plucked from its programme 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 programme, 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 programme 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 and temporal order ('live' in the sense of potentially immediate, continuous and coexistent). 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 popularisation of the remote control – and its coeval, the VCR – audiences have been able to renegotiate the sequence of programme flow and flummox the audience metrics bean-counters. Leaving aside these economic concerns, what about the metatextual 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 online and massive archival digitisation 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 programme 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, promises 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, 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 programme possibilities, either refashioning their own texts or recombining contexts and causal sequences of texts to express new meanings. The shift under way 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 emblematises 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.<sup>3</sup> Although mainstream television is flirting ever more intently with user-generated content (*America’s Funniest Home Videos*, 1989–present; BBC’s *Video Diaries*, 1991–2; and citizen journalism forms such as *CNN: I-Reports*, 2006–present), much YouTube content is predicated upon the viewer/user’s reappropriation and recontextualisation of existing televisual and film material. Feature programmes, 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 centre 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 online 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 channelling 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 normalised and is growing steadily; second, virtually all mainstream American television programmes 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 monopolising 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 programmes. CBS, for example, allows access to a range of promotional and ephemeral material (interviews, previews, programme 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 primetime shows like *Lost* (2004–10), *Desperate Housewives* (2004–present) and *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005–present) in which the feature programme 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 cellphone 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, 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 *ephemeralisation*, as programmes are cut down to teaser-size for the small screen with the blessings of their network producers (and protectors). As viewing platforms continue to decentre 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 chapter has argued that the ephemeral and media are inexorably intertwined, certainly if we step back and consider the nature of our experiential encounters with time-based media, and their archival lives and afterlives 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 contextualisation and potential meaning production and as such offers a metatextual 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

seventy-five 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 rapid changes in technology, audience behaviours 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.

## Notes

1. This section 'recombines' elements developed for a related argument about television's relationship with history first published in Uricchio (2010).
2. Derek Kompare (2005) offers an excellent overview of this practice.
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).

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