Television: Presenting the Memory Machine

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Time is the substance I am made of. Time is the river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me but I am the fire.

Jorge Luis Borges

In the beginning, there will always have been television.

Television is no longer innocent. Or at least we are no longer so innocent when we watch. Ever since its inception television has been denounced with a fervour that would lead one to suspect complicity (in much the same way that Foucault suggested the discourse of prison reform was itself a vital part of the modern prison).

Television has been charged as corruptor of public morals, as spreading permissiveness, as brainwashing a generation, as destroyer of the art of conversation and family living, as losing the Vietnam war...

At the same time from other quarters we have been offered an all too transparent plenitude. Television has been proclaimed as the eye of democracy, the gift of entertainment, the purveyor of knowledge...

It seems the meanings 'television' has for us continually multiply. And there are many other voices in this dialogue.

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In this account television begins with the age of reproduction. It is the machine that bridges the second and third ages of technology, inhabiting the space between machines which ‘eat’ and machines which ‘think’. It is a different machine from those of the classical machine age. It is static. And in its lack of movement it seems to be everywhere. It is a narrative machine (like cinema, but unlike). It is also a time machine.¹ And it is necessarily a memory machine.

Memory, whether personal or collective, always implies a certain form of ordering (narration) and a certain experience of time through this ordering. Thought itself ‘moves’ in time and the way we think is intimately related to our thinking of time. John Berger has suggested, ‘It is indeed the first task of any culture to propose an understanding of the time of consciousness, of the relations to the past and the future realised as such’.²

It is precisely in its complex interlacing of narrative, time and memory that broadcast television has become so important. It is a crucial site in the playing out of the old struggle over the continuing activity of the past in the present. But, even more fundamentally, it shakes the entire framework of temporality underpinning traditional ways in which cultures have imagined remembrance of the past to be possible. It is this relation between the development of sophisticated visual technologies (the photography-cinema-tele-

vision triptych) with a powerful historical ideology of vision as truth and the concurrent transformation of memory and temporality which concerns me here. For it seems that these devices were mobilized as specific types of narrative machines at a time when memory and the past had once again become a locus of difficulty for a society in the process of transforming itself.

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Once upon a time memory was largely the function and faculty of the oral tradition — collective memory handed down from generation to generation in ‘that slow piling one on top of the other of thin transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through

1. Ricoeur postulates a reciprocal relation between narrative and time: temporality as the structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity, narrativity as the language structure which has temporality as its ultimate referent, ‘Narrative Time’, Critical Inquiry 7, 1980, p. 169.

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the layers of a variety of retellings'. Lyotard suggests that a community characterized by the oral narrative tradition paradoxically 'has no need to remember its past. It finds the raw material for its social bond not only in the meaning of the narratives it recounts, but also in the act of reciting them. The narrative's reference may seem to belong to the past, but in reality it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation.' This living record of memory, still active in informing and framing the experience of the present, was the womb of the various epic narrative forms.

The disruption of traditional practices of remembering which occurred under the pressure of a nascent capitalism necessitated the formulation of a new relation to time. The shift to the cities signalled the end of the time when people had no consciousness of linear time. The varying intensities of rural work where time was task oriented and seasonal was replaced by the new regularities of urban living and the mill. It was with Newton that time had first become an absolute value, an image of clockwork engulfing the universe. 'Absolute, True and Mathematical Time, of itself and from its own nature flows equably without relation to anything external...'. And it was with Descartes that the human body got lost in the clock. 'I consider the human body as a machine... my thought compares a sick man and an ill-made clock, with my idea of a healthy man and a well-made clock.'

Drawing on these frameworks, the new temporality involved a different relation to memory and the past. The increasing separation of a hegemonic scientific form from narrative knowledge established the past as data and the future as project or hypothesis. Whereas the epic tradition was a narrative knowledge not dependent on the mathematical unities of time, space and action, the Newtonian conception of time made it possible to think causality as a simple, objectively determinable relation between two points or moments. With respect to this mechanical time, any mode of thinking or expression involving 'irregular' time was defined as error. Time became irreversible, a unilinear unfolding of singular events dominated by the principle of non-contradiction. This abstract conception of time is a relatively recent development which instituted a new 'episteme'. It underpins a distinctive modern

6. Ibid., p. 40.
subjectivity embodied in a rigorous protocol for ordering and narrating the relation to the past. Under pressure of the imperialist drive, this time and its forms of remembering attempted to colonize the whole world.

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It was in the nineteenth century that the massive disruption of traditional forms of memory really emerged as a significant problem. Capitalism’s new work disciplines conjoined the beginning of the age of large-scale and unprecedented emigration. The transition from the old to the new surged through experience as a kind of subjective epistemic rupture.

As the sense of the eternal was shaken there was new hope and promise for the future in the revolutionary struggles of the 1840s. For the ascendant classes, however, the vital task was to consolidate a changed relation to time and the past in order to establish the ‘natural’ harmony of the present.

Part of capitalism’s revolutionary nature is its radical, dynamic principle of continual transformation of the social relations of production. Such a social form inevitably generates an ongoing and escalating mnemonic crisis. The past can no longer be located in the present but must instead be conceived from the perspective of its own continual and chaotic disappearance. Yet, at the same time, the past cannot simply be allowed to vanish. Despite its inbuilt obsolescence, our sense of pride demands the retention of a continuous and stable past in order to assure us of the superiority of the present.

Thus the past is rendered mortal in the name of Progress, and yet is approached with the tender desire of preservation by the same social forces which work to ensure its continual annihilation. It is this dislocation and dismembering of past from present which dictates the urgency of the need for the new memory techniques.

The nineteenth century formulated the relation to the past as a knowledge under the name of History. Perhaps for the first time, the present was thought and defined through the prism of a disciplined obsession with the past. Not that other societies ignored the past; rather, it is in the nineteenth century that the all too palpable ephemerality of existing social forms provoked a mnemonic crisis to which the answer became ‘History’. The new memory techniques, symbolized by the museum, dreamt of appropriating the past with the plenitude and putative objectivity of Science. The
ultimate fantasy was resuscitation: ‘the way it really was’. Only much much better. As other cultures and past traditions evolved over centuries were obliterated in one, they were sorted into boxes, files and books, exhibited behind glass cases, photographed, classified, collected and mummified. The nineteenth-century dream of history was additive and logically culminated in the perspective of a universal history dominated by the simple mechanical laws of Absolute Time. For Walter Benjamin, ‘The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through an empty homogeneous time’.7 In this time, the past as remembered by the oral tradition has ceased to exist.

The crux of this change is the development of History as a self-conscious form of remembering which simultaneously denies its active stake in the present. When History becomes the warder of an authentic past, a certain threshold is crossed. The creative reflexivity of so-called ‘living memory’ has become a vast tomb of formal reflexivity into which the continuing mnemonic crisis can be displaced and hidden. It is here that the problem of the modern past is born. The past is never authentic. It can only ever be lived in the present; artificial, posed anew each time. As Walter Benjamin wrote, living memory ‘means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger . . . In every era the attempt must be made to wrest tradition from a conformism which is about to overpower it.’8 The terms of this struggle were to be radically transformed by the development of a new hypnmonmonic device in the nineteenth century.

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With the camera something changed. Suddenly it was possible to cut out pieces of the world and hold them in our hands. Indefinitely.

It is pure chance that this occurs in 1839. And yet it is no accident that the technology precisely fits the desire for a memory device to fill the demands of the mnemonic crisis. Hypnomic devices have a long history: drawing, hieroglyph, rebus, writing. The photograph is the first industrialized visual technology. In its sheer perceptual wealth, apparently translatable into permanent and positive knowledge, it is assured a distinctive place in modern consciousness. The photograph becomes an important tool in the organization and disciplining of the new, mass urban population,

8. Ibid., p. 257.
functioning as a means of record and a source of evidence for the fledgling police force, lunatic asylums and other such institutions of the nascent modern state. It is a vital political technology for a society concerned to increase its surveillance and regulation over people, to instil time and motion efficiency as the organizing essence of life.

Photography also functions as a principle apparatus enabling the wholesale collection and cataloguing of the past as a commodity. (‘The camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood’ writes Susan Sontag.) As the old past disappears, the desire to photograph it grows more fervent. The photo album appears as the extended family vanishes. The principle of the exhaustive archive as ultimate historical referent emerges to underwrite this transformation. Photography quickly moves from concentration only on that which is considered important to a position where everything photographed is invested with a novel importance. What begins as a challenge to existing depictions of society by seeking to expose the selective blindness of much traditional art is swallowed by the political vacuity of the photographer’s catch-cry, ‘The world is beautiful’.

Importantly, the collision of camera with memory not only establishes the photograph as a respected memory device. It also rebounds. Memory, the relation between memory and truth, is framed anew. Truth had long been conceived in terms of light, resemblance and the transparency of the passage eye to mind. The camera situates the historical moment when truth is conceived less as the revelation and unveiling of an original object and more as a mechanism of reproduction. The question of truth is even more firmly fixed as one of vision, but now from the perspective of a perfect and transparent memory function dependent upon infinite repetition of the same. Discussions of memory have always been linked to questions of identity. The modern fantasy of true collection as the technique of repeating something in its exact identity is heavily inscribed by the development of photographic reproduction, or serial reproduction in general. The imposition of photographic fidelity as the primary disposition of perfect memory is part of this general metaphorization of truth as an optical machine.

A further threshold is crossed with the development of cameras which take multiple frames per second, generating the impression

of capturing movement. The increasing sophistication of the moving picture apparatus establishes the motion itself as the crux of a crucial difference between cinema and photograph. The photograph is a massive investment in hypostatized identity, ‘the stupefying evidence of this is how it was’, present but always already located in the past. Cinema constructs a new type of archive, a meshing together of fantasy with the famous ‘impression of reality’. (For Metz, ‘Every film is a fiction film’.) The experience of cinema is less simply the assumption of a simple identity but rather a whole process of narrativization, temporalization and identification. The ‘imaginary’ of film is finally not the illusion of a past (a ‘thing’ of the past) but of a presence, a complex play of relations becoming present here and now for me.

In his Note on the ‘Mystic Writing Pad’, Freud observes that devices to aid our memory seem particularly imperfect, since our mental apparatus accomplishes precisely what they cannot: it has an unlimited receptive capacity for new perceptions and nevertheless lays down permanent — even though not unalterable — memory traces of them.

Memory, compared to a camera, is able to ‘reproduce’ itself from within by its own means of action. It is precisely to this ‘superiority’ of natural memory that the cinematic archive of presence addresses a challenge. But it is only with the development of broadcast television that this fantasy is fully exploited. Here memory becomes notoriously unreliable and the prosthesis threatens to replace the organ.

Like cinema, the technological apparatus of broadcast television enables the establishment of ‘present’ images. Although the image resolution is not as high as that of film, the television screen still presents us with an unaccustomed perceptual wealth compared to other forms of representation. In this process, television draws on the prevailing codes of perspective, proportion and depth inherited from Renaissance oil painting, still photography and cinema. Arguably, the need to ‘close’ the image by learning to read moving dots and vibrations as pictures and sounds from the world feeds our sense of participation and collusion with the medium. Because the chains of images and sounds emanating from television are

always ceaselessly trembling on this moment of actualizing themselves, of becoming present to us here and now in our processes of watching, it generates a powerful and irreducible sense of spanning space and time. Television is the technology of a transportation medium, not so much taking you to the scene as bringing the scene to you.

Overlaying this technological base is a narrative mechanism of direct address, specific to television as an audio-visual broadcast medium. The ability to transmit live images from events as they occur distinguishes television from any other mechanism of representation. And, despite the fact that very little television today is actually ‘live’, this sense of immediacy and simultaneity remains the principal legitimating fantasy in the construction of the television world.

As a medium, broadcast television provides a continuous stream of programming. Stories within individual programmes are narrated by the cumulative linking of self-contained internal segments. But unlike the classic text of cinema or novel, successive segments often have no overt causal narrative connection. For example, news items are usually unified as a coherent programme at the more abstract level of happenings in time (‘today’) or place (‘Melbourne’, ‘Australia’). In addition, segments are consistently ‘interrupted’ by advertisements, ‘updates’ and station announcements — repetition splinters — which make no attempt to tailor themselves to the ongoing programme. Television programmes, fiction and non-fiction alike, are narrated across these juxtaposed segments.14 The fact that broadcast television layers together multiple individual texts in this dispersed narrative form suggests that its characteristic address as medium is not one of homogeneity and textual unity, but a complexity of voices, a plurality of subjectivities and a heterogeneity of intersecting discourses. As such, television could be thought to challenge the classical forms of representation which position the subject as unique point of address and origin of meaning.

The usual mode of viewing television does not depend so much on the individual text characteristic of cinema or novel. Daily viewing tends to be in time blocks and, despite marked beginnings and endings, all programmes in a block overlap and feed the effects of others. The series/serial format characteristic of much television

14. As John Ellis has pointed out, the distinction between ‘fiction’ and ‘non-fiction’ on television is a function of the putative origin of the narrative material, not of its narrative organization; Visible Fictions, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 45.
production also facilitates this tendency. It proposes not so much one complete and final position of truth at the end of each programme, but rather a limited narrative resolution, a pleasure of hesitation and prolongation around the more fundamental narrative dilemmas which will be played out and extended over weeks or even years. It is through the repetition of ritual narrative figures and formats that television assembles a cumulative memory-repository for its audience. In a calculated blend of routine and difference, established characters appear week to week in novel situations, and established situations appear week to week with novel characters.

Yet to simply assume that the plurality of channels, programmes and different voices necessarily undermines the more traditional form of subjectivity is problematic. The complexity of voices on television can in fact usually be broken down to a discourse which weaves together two tones of a single voice/look: one which acknowledges my presence as viewer and one which behaves as if I am not there.

The address which dominates cinema is characterized by the second mode. ‘I am looking but it does not look at me looking’ is the fundamental denial which specifies the subject’s voyeuristic relation to the screen. The pleasure and fascination of cinema depends on this construction of a vacuum-sealed panoptic space where we can see without being seen. What is in question is the organization and hold of the look and looks in the film, the sewing together of my look at the screen with the relay of character looks at each other (point of view, perspective, eye-line match as the visual correlate of causality, and so on). The absences posed by character looks off-screen are conventionally ‘filled’ in a succeeding shot showing the looked-at — either another character or part of the narrative space. But their look cannot come to rest on me, or the whole film would be lost.

Given the dominance of this system, radical cinema has generally been conceived in terms of textual self-reflexivity: actors stepping out of character to address the audience, camera and crew intrusion into the picture, the processes of production shown, the image scratched and defaced, the fourth wall punctured, the suture opened . . .

This understanding of the radical project has spilled over into


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television, often without consideration of the different forms of narrative address broadcast television conventionally mobilizes. Strategies of disruption cannot be considered subversive in themselves but need to be understood in the context of the narrative economy into which they are inserted. In the case of television, the "interruptions" and direct address mechanisms which could be considered radical elsewhere (cinema, writing) demand re-examination.

The most common device differentiating the television narrative of direct address from other forms is the use of an actor looking and speaking straight into the camera as if s/he can see you. Actors involved in presenting news and current affairs programmes are prototype carriers of this image. But the use of 'host' figures is much wider than this, most interestingly in programmes which are framed and identified by a presenter who has no other function integral to the actual text. Consider the hosts of various movie, sports replay or music video programmes. They are there to give continuity and unity to a disparate and random collection of items.

But more than this, their function is to facilitate the fantasy that they are watching with you. Often the host has a monitor in the studio. They turn to face the monitor as we go 'into' the actual programme. We emerge complicit. They are ready with a joke about what we have seen. Or a comment to contextualize or direct our readings. We laugh together. The next segment comes on.

The use of hosts as framing devices is not merely decoration or marginalia to the 'real' television programmes. Hosts are an integral part of the current imaginary exploited by broadcast television.

Television still functions as a putative 'window to the world', styling itself as a medium from which nothing is excluded. It presents itself as a screen capable of framing any image or story without fundamental translation problems for its narrative economy. This may be termed its originating panoptic function inherited from the acquisitive documentary projects of photography and cinema, playing out an old desire to be in the perfect place or have the perfect technique to see all and know all.

But in offering itself as all encompassing spectacle, television has had to adapt in response to the deficiencies shadowing the abundance of its vision. Despite replays, close-ups, multiple cameras and special effects television's current mythology means it must also attempt to account for the moment when you become aware of its finitude, of the things it doesn't show. There is always the possi-
bility of a different look from another place, a look not from you but at you.\textsuperscript{17} Mainstream cinema works to deny this moment. The established system of cinematic narrative binds the relay of looks into a formal wholeness cohering around a single unseen spectator in a darkened scene of watching. Television plays this moment differently, parrying the possible return of the gaze and the sense of an incomplete picture by joining the circle in the host who watches both the spectacle and us. The layering of television narrative through the host function constructs a hierarchical discourse which works to position a ‘you’ and ‘I’ always watching ‘them’. It is this promise of co-presence with the television host as intimate friend which bolsters the plenitude of the spectacle and reassures us against the fears of our being objects.

Of course this reassurance is never complete. We know we are not really being looked at and recognized by the host. We know we are not really seeing everything. But this sense of ‘knowing’ is layered by the ambiguity of fantasy and desire.\textsuperscript{18} Television plays on this ambiguity offering a virtual space of presence in which we can believe that we both see and are seen, watching the other and at the same time recognized in our individuality from the place of the other. This ambiguity underwrites the fascination of personalizing the host characters as ‘ordinary people’ with very public biographies. The television personality is not a distant and remote star but an accessible figure willing to enter the intimacies of everyday existence. A similar fascination determines the pleasure of seeing ‘ordinary people’ on screen as quiz show contestants, audiences or human interest stories. These positions are as much sites for identification as are the more recognized ‘fictional’ characters of television production. Their importance lies in the fact that it is via the interplay of projection and identification that the medium is humanized even as it becomes more and more remote in terms of its technology and ownership.

The final moment of the current television address concerns the strategies of self-reflexivity which have been so important for the avante-garde challenge to mainstream film and literature. It seems television now plays this moment also. In street interviews the cameras filming the events have become standard shots. News and

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\item This tension may be expressed in terms of the split Lacan describes between eye and gaze: ‘I see only from one point but in my existence I am looked at from all sides’; \textit{The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis}, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979, p. 7.
\item ‘You never look at me from the place from which I see you ...’; \textit{ibid.}, p. 103.
\end{enumerate}
current affairs programmes now conventionally close with a camera pulling back to reveal the studio technology: console, crew, cameras, lights. Shows made up of 'mistakes', 'behind the scenes' or 'the making of' other programmes are increasingly popular. Apparently nothing need be hidden.

Rather than merely replaying the fantasy of watching the other, it seems television also plays the fantasy that we can watch ourselves (watching). Television dissociates the classic self-other dyad in its growing desire to be its own other. However, this apparent self-reflexivity is not so much a radical development of narrative pragmatics as it is a formal incorporation of radical strategies. This formal reflexivity of television does not dispute the terms of self-other subjectivity so much as tighten and intensify them. In doing so it precisely determines television's current efficacy and social prominence.

The fantasy of vision imagining itself as consciousness generates the illusion of a consciousness able to turn completely back on itself, the inside-out structure of 'seeing oneself seeing oneself'. This is the constitutive moment of the modern television discourse, embodying a distinctly modern form of subjectivity in its mode of address. Here television transports narrative and subjectivity into a new age where a certain self-conscious self-consciousness about the way in which the world is narrated (or the narrative is 'worlded') forms an integral part of the narration itself.

This represents a huge transformation for a machine of 'popular' narrative: the difference between a narrative form which legitimates itself in its process of actualization embedded in the culture in which it evolved, and a narrative form which needs to incorporate the question of its own process as a constitutive referent for a culture which it is currently reframing.

Such a transformation suggests a fundamental split between the subject of traditional narrative knowledge and that of television narrative. The traditional narrative depended on the storyteller and the listeners knowing how to be what the story told. With television this is no longer necessary.

It is important to recognize the contradiction in this shift. In the breadth of its audience reach and its capacity for multiplicity television seems to offer the potential for transcendence of the parochial limits of previous social forms. Yet its specific history has always taken a trajectory towards a radical new homogenization of the social.

19. Ibid., p. 82.
In taking over many of the social functions of popular narrative, television has changed the nature of social bonding. Television no longer offers counsel or communication, argument or reason, only the spectacle of immediate and transparent reflexivity with reference to itself. As such, it displaces the democratic and folkloric traditions it claims to reproduce as a 'popular' medium. Today the popular is the name of a mass produced television commodity. You are its subject and its object too. Television shows a world it creates and creates you as it shows, simultaneously and self-consciously.

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It is through its apparent reflexivity that television has been able to so successfully marginalize other forms of social interchange. As television has inflated itself any rigid distinction between the real and the television representation of the real has become more problematic. In this situation television increasingly comes to guarantee the experience of the real, including ways of participating in and narrating (remembering) it. Personal memory becomes anxiously fallible and notoriously unreliable in the face of the television appropriation of experience. In a certain sense memory is now to be found before perception: events are conceived from the perspective of their future remembrance rather than the present enactment of their participants. This can be seen at all levels of the social, from the staging of mass events for television to the current fashion for video productions of weddings in which all significant moments are first played for the camera alone. 'I was there but I didn't actually see it on TV' begins to make sense at this time.

People are shown not what they were but what they must remember they were. The significance of this is not merely the massive investments television makes in representing a mythic past which has never existed (although attention to its systematic exclusions here are important). With living memory also 'what is at stake is less remembering than the rewriting of history' in the present. More vital here is the social valorization of a desire for, a technology capable of appropriating and fixing an authentic past. Television in its self-reflexive form styles itself as the modern answer to the ongoing mnemonic crisis of capitalism. But its fabulous and infallible representations, heavily dependent on a grossly over-developed eye, necessarily reduce the complexity and sensuality of experience. This is not to suggest that all television

is merely ‘bad’. Rather, that a society which privileges the formal reflexivity of television as a form of interaction has established a situation in which the most vital qualities of living memory are progressively marginalized. Living memory can function through artificial memory devices including visual texts. But today its diverse time frames, the unforeseeable creativity of imagining and narrating in new ways are defined as wastage, as error, as inefficient or inadequate. The television techno-memory has facilitated this atrophy. It has not yet replaced the organ but it would like to define its patterns and uses.

This techno-memory of television signals an important characteristic about television address. Since television no longer functions principally as a means of ‘communication’, its meaning can no longer be assumed to be a set of messages about the world. Rather, its meaning is located in its continual process of enframing the world. This situation, in which television proposes and legitimates itself as the self-conscious master-discourse of immediacy, is achieved through the circularity of its address. The intertwining of a narrative showing (the world) and a narrative showing itself showing catches the television subject simultaneously on both sides of a revolving door: I see/I am not seen, I am seen/I cannot see. In this figuring of a new scene of avowal/disavowal, television achieves its final level of textual unity (over and above the content or closure of any individual segment or programme). This is why the characteristic experience of television viewing is not of fragmentation but of regularity and flow effected at the level of medium as frame. And in an era in which the traditional grand narratives of social bonding and legitimation are being shaken elsewhere, television comes to assume its full responsibility as a constitutive and grounding element of the new social form.

The significance of this development lies in its implications for the wholesale reconstruction of fundamental assumptions of social life. In this sense, it seems the meaning of television as enframing is now largely to be found in its framing of time. In modern urban communities in which mechanical conceptions of time have marginalized all other possible understanding, seasons have been replaced by ratings. ‘Natural’ rhythms have assumed less importance in the regulation of social life. Television, along with radio, peak hour traffic intensities and the on-off of work-leisure functions as a daily pacemaker. It is in this period that it becomes possible to describe television as a great visual clock. It is a secular narrative metronome segmenting night and day, ordering and punctuating a frantic cultural tempo for society which believes itself to be running out of time.
However, it is not merely in its institutionalization of a complex viewing routine that television inscribes a particular temporal existence. Rather, it is its impact on what E. P. Thompson termed ‘time sense’ that television most fundamentally reworks the social.\textsuperscript{21} The techno-memory of television depends upon and feeds a passion for the endless replaying of the moment in which the modern subject can imagine itself seeing itself. Here television operates as a temporal hinge, dislocating the past from the present and joining the rupture with the frantic repetition of an endless series of updated, atomized present moments which neither inflect or inform each other. The direct address of television narrative constitutes time as immediacy, always a simple ‘now’ complete in itself. Whether a past ‘now’ or a future ‘now’, it is predominantly a linear unfolding of similar discrete and autonomous moments, in the construction of individual texts as much as at the level of scheduling.

In this sense, television continues the trajectory of the memory and theory machines geared up in the nineteenth century. And as capitalism has generalized the need for new techniques of chronometry and memory, television has increasingly come to dominate the social form. In doing so, it intensifies the radical disjunction between past, present and future so symptomatic of industrial societies of the last three centuries.

However, in an important sense, our present situation is very different from that of the previous epoch. In its desire to transcend the past, the nineteenth century was characterized by a strong teleological faith in the future of Reason and Progress. In contrast, our current relation to the future is one of vertigo. Rather than an horizon of promise to be surmounted, the future now looms with the terror and uncertainty of an abyss. In a way it has become unimaginable. It would be presumptuous to summarize all the ‘causes’ of this change, or to claim that we were the first to ever have this experience. But it seems that the threshold of the nuclear age has contributed to the transformation of our attitude to the future and to time in general.

Where culture and collective memory once offered the possibility of negotiating the limits of individual death, nuclear war forces us to think the possibility of a destruction of all life without remainder. It is perhaps this impossible and apocalyptic relation to the future which has turned us around to face our past in a new way.

Time has grown faster. It is no longer a gradual process of

erosion, ageing and weathering but an unstoppable juggernaut hurtling out of control, continuously annihilating everything that would stand in its path. Machines, skills, knowledge, people which once lasted a lifetime are now conceived from the viewpoint of their impending redundancy. The human being, after being defined and trained to function like a machine, is now a bottleneck in the process. The body is inefficient and archaic. This is a time of destruction and disappearances, wistful ends and the poignancy of 'no longer'. We have no history. We exist without memory. We are the first and last, watching ourselves waving goodbye.

In this age which is profoundly nostalgic, television is the perfect medium for nostalgia. Or rather nostalgia is the perfect discourse for television. Nostalgia renders the past an amorphous and idyllic referent. It becomes a distant spectacle of innocence and purity judged from the perspective of the fall in the chaotic present and vertiginous future. Nostalgia does not mourn the past or facilitate its active remembrance in any way. It is not about a self-reflexive opening up of the past, but a formally reflexive sampling. Nostalgia confirms its own sweetness by the ineluctable horizon of inevitable disappearance. It is nourished by this foregrounding of the pleasure of forgetting. When the 'do you remember' of an authentic and more perfect past overpowers and anaesthetizes the experience of the present nostalgia assumes its full status.

The nostalgic is not merely the longing for a time but also a place: the time-place of home, of being perfectly at home. According to Eliade, home is established 'at the heart of the real'. In a culture in which no-one feels at home any more, television functions to re-inject the real, the authentic, everywhere. Watching from a segmented, privatized, isolated, domestic environment the viewer observes the real as it occurs continuously elsewhere. Television dismantles the real of home and local community and increasingly moves us into an abstract world, a tourist in the trackless and timeless existence of our own living rooms.

In the process it is now increasingly called upon to whisper the safe caress of nostalgia. This is manifested not only in its mythic histories and docu-dramas, its golden years of repetition, rerun movies and other incarnations of the contemporary past, but also in its dominant passion for seeing itself seeing (itself), in which the present is alleviated of its misery and rendered nostalgic for itself.

In its mechanism of direct address, television intensifies the self-conscious plenitude of the present moment. It is this which facilitates the distinct modern subjectivity played out through television: the constitution of a subject recognizing him/her self
as radically autonomous from others, from the social, and from past and future. The identity and thought of this subject is thus grounded in the temporal caesura operated by television narrative, demanding conformity to the simple motions of mathematical time and causality. Contradiction, ambiguity (resistance to prompt verifiability), duration give way to homogeneity, a hysteria of certainty and instant solutions. The implications for a society in which such a narrative machine intersects with the commodity form as a dominant means of social bonding are today becoming only too obvious in the ‘rational’ demand for the noise-free communication/information society as a lived possibility. In its tendency towards national and international networking television offers the achievement of this fantasy, enabling the monopolistic dissemination of hegemonic narratives not merely on a metropolitan but a transcultural scale. As Ashis Nandy remarked in another context, this offer marks the return of the nineteenth century dream of ‘one world, one people’ but this time as a nightmare of homogeneity.

In its current broadcast form television both draws on and feeds the general commodification of time, offering a global cultural existence lived only in one narrative-time frame. Speed in itself has become a value of information exchange. In the process there is a tendency to forget other human notations of time which have never conformed to clock time. The times of consciousness and the unconscious cannot be considered uniform, homogeneous, unidirectional or absolute. They are ‘irregularly’ and multiply layered by different biological rhythms such as breathing, heartbeat, circulation, menstruation, ageing and infused by other rhythms such as eating, dreaming, sleeping, running, and fucking. These times make no sense in the logical schema of a single televised time concerned only with the frenzied succession of atomized instants (seconds, micro-seconds . . .)

In ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’, Borges writes: ‘In contrast to Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not believe in uniform absolute time. He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times’.22 Such a conception of time suggests a richer existence than our contemporary cultural settings recognize or desire. Drawing from other cultures and from some of the manifest paradoxes and tensions of the temporal economy of our own, it seems the under-

23. Since Einstein a rethinking of time has been on the agenda. The development of quantum physics and ideas such as action at a distance and morphic resonance have fundamental implications for the general cultural frame.
standing of time as multiple or serial is perhaps beginning to return from its confinement in the prison of classical physics. This return is vital in the forging of a new relation to the world, one in which we exist less as trespassers or looters and act instead as if we live here. Yet it still demands a massive shift in the way we think time.

One element of such a shift is to challenge the dominance television gives to the autonomous and self-conscious presence of the present moment. Such a rethinking could begin a transformation of the demands we make on television as a machine of immediacy, a loosening of the hold and fascination of its current self-conscious economy. If television became less important, it might also become less impossible. ‘That the present in general is not primal but rather reconstituted, that it is not the absolute wholly living form which constitutes experience, that there is no purity of the living present — such is the theme.’

This is to suggest thinking time not as a line of points of modified presence (past ‘nows’, future ‘nows’) but rather as a motion involving both repetition and difference; a regular cycle which is also original each time it repeats. In each cycle there are traces of the past, deferred effects which irreducibly and continually structure the experience of the present even as it unforeseeably outreaches itself in the future. This motion in time can be figured as a spiral or cone. And in this figure the horizon of experience is not necessarily constructed according to the limits of one time, one place at a time. Rather, it enables us to give voice to the diverse time frames of our experience: premonition, lapsus, reverie, synchronicity, permanency, deferral, anticipation, the anterior past of a memory which writes its own predecessors.

This problem of our relation to time is not new but its intersection with media and information technologies has developed it in new ways. In 1932 Hans Arp wrote: ‘the little folk song of time and space has been wiped out by the cerebral sponge. Was there ever a bigger swine than the man who invented the expression time is money.’ When television works time into a commodity and the media barons are playing in the trough, it becomes more and more necessary for time to be remembered. It may even become possible to remember, without nostalgia, that there was once a time when television didn’t exist.

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