THE NEW ATLANTIS
A Journal of Technology & Society

In Search of Lost Time on YouTube

Laurence Scott

A history of our era may one day be told through the hungry, wide-angle lens of YouTube. Adding hundreds of hours of footage to its archive every minute, YouTube captures the appetites and deliriums of our times. Historians of the future will be able to trace contemporary ethics in the site's "community guidelines." This evolving document records our prohibitions. It defines the territory of acceptable behavior and the scope of our vision, setting limits on what we can permit one another to see. How will the short-lived "Bird Box Challenge"—in which people recorded themselves performing daily tasks blindfolded, endangering themselves and others in imitation of the eponymous film—come to mark our relationship to reality in our increasingly mediated, movie-like world?

The digital era has given more people than ever before the ability to turn into instant videographers, recording life as it occurs simply by holding up a smartphone. Consider the relative rarity of citizen footage of 9/11, compared to how comprehensively that event would have been documented today. With the improving robustness of live-streaming software, it's not surprising that video-hosting sites such as YouTube and Facebook have become broadcasters of the ever-unfolding moment. Both sites were widely criticized after the mass shooting at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand in March, which the perpetrator live-streamed on Facebook. The initial stream was viewed live by about two hundred people, but before Facebook removed it, users recorded it and re-uploaded it to Facebook over a million times. They also uploaded it to YouTube: A spokesperson told the *Guardian* that the site had received an "unprecedented" volume of content showing the horrific event, with the rate reaching a new video uploaded every second. The sites struggled to subdue these gruesome scenes, which nightmarishly returned more quickly than their content moderators, both human and automated, could remove them.

YouTube reflects and shapes our modernity. For the younger generations it is both a news source and a repository of the newest entertainments. Late-night talk shows are no longer only watched during the slow

Laurence Scott *is a lecturer in writing at New York University in London and the author of* Picnic Comma Lightning: The Experience of Reality in the Twenty-First Century *(W.W. Norton, 2019) and* The Four-Dimensional Human: Ways of Being in the Digital World *(W.W. Norton, 2015).*

drift into sleep, but in pithy fragments at all times of day. YouTube has also offered the fortunate few a mutated kind of celebrity status, earning millions in advertising revenue for its stars—those with the most popular channels.

But while there are few things more clearly of-the-moment than our biggest video-sharing site, YouTube is also the closest thing we have invented to a time machine: Its channels open new routes back to the past. Over these years I've come to understand that *my* YouTube, what I make of it, is one of the most melancholy places I've ever visited. I find that I turn to it to experience an exquisite kind of sadness, born from its way of restoring lost time only to take it away once more. The scenes and atmospheres of the past that come and go—as copyright infringements are enforced or channels simply subside—are like digital visitations, having the capriciousness and the fragility of all revenants.

Back from Oblivion

The French theorist Roland Barthes was sensitive to both the melancholy and the spectrality of images from the past. His concept of "the punctum," which he formulated in his meditation on photography, *Camera Lucida* (1980), predicts some of the angst of inhabiting YouTube's emotional landscape, its world of resurrected moments. The punctum is a detail in a photographic image that pierces the viewer's imagination. For Barthes, it is "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)." The punctum is never part of an image's intended meaning, never a planned, conscious detail but rather an accidental, tiny storehouse of emotion. Watching old YouTube videos originating from my childhood years is guaranteed to leave me feeling like a pincushion. The puncta are everywhere.

For example, on any given day, it's quite possible that I'll take a mini-tour back to the tennis matches of the late 1980s and early 90s. Sometimes a video from this vast archive of amateur uploads will be streaked with those little gray lines symptomatic of a poor television signal. Part of my childhood was spent without cable TV in rural southern Ontario, and I remember the green lawns of Wimbledon dashed with these flickering hyphens. They could be electronic equivalents of the local weather, when a storm outside would begin as a sprinkling of interference on our screen before obscuring Andre Agassi altogether behind a crackling fog. Or they could simply be winking reminders of our remoteness from both my birth country of England and a reliable TV mast. Whatever they once meant,

they were creatures of a technological age that has since gone. I view them now on my otherwise crisp laptop screen, and instantly I'm back in one of those humid Ontario summer afternoons, when the sky would turn from hazy blue to elephant gray to bottle green, a shivering quarterfinal on the television and, through the window, my mother gathering up the washing half-dry from the line.

YouTube resurrects another eradicated failing of our old audiovisual lives: the silvery tear that would inch down our screens as one VCR recording gave way to the next. Why am I so attached to this clumsy transition? YouTube's indiscriminateness, whereby the incidental is remembered alongside the momentous, replicates to some extent the nonsensical aspect of memory, which preserves some truly unimpressive and unimportant things and makes them glow with mysterious meaning.

I feel disproportionately moved by the commercials that resurface on YouTube by accident, because someone in 1991 didn't pause her recording and then, years later, she, or perhaps some younger, digital-native relative, didn't edit them out of the uploaded video. Old slogans come back from oblivion: "Yo Quiero Taco Bell"; "Sunny Delight—the good stuff kids go for." Weird advertising conceits are caught in YouTube's amber—the Huggies commercial where babies are playing baseball ("There was no joy in Diaperville; the team was all wet!"). I can remember listening to these words over and over for a brief season in 1990 and then not thinking of them again until they reappeared in YouTube's margins.

Like the fossilized mosquito in *Jurassic Park*, these scraps of cultural ephemera hold the DNA of a lost world. From them I can extract and return from extinction a long-ago living room, with its red carpet and exposed-brick chimney. These drops of preserved time are generous, containing in miniature a thousand blueprints for memories: a suburban swimming pool sealed up for the winter, along with school friends' train-track smiles, a history project on George Washington, neon highlighters, sour candies in the shape of keys fizzing on the tongue, social anxieties and family worries, the touch of a cousin's warm, bald head, the starship Enterprise hanging among the stars (shot from below), the white noise of space.

A Channel to the Underworld

Of course, we don't have to rely on the accidental YouTube punctum to transport us into the past. Much of my YouTube nostalgia is explicitly, tenaciously sought. With eyes wide open, I've gone in search of a specific

scene from the 1980s cartoon *Ulysses 31*, a sci-fi retelling of Homer's *Odyssey*. I recall the scene now as one of my earliest exposures not merely to death but to grief. In this version, Ulysses is the captain of a spaceship whose crew an enraged Zeus turns to stone in the first episode. As a five-year-old I remember the horror of seeing them all dangling midair in suspended animation, dozens of them like mannequins with their arms at their sides and their eyes closed, filling the ship's high-ceilinged hangar. Ulysses and a small posse of survivors discover the frozen crew, one of whom, a young girl, calls out for her brother, who is out of reach and cannot hear her.

Over thirty years later, YouTube returns me to this scene. I wonder now if somehow YouTube itself prompted me to think of this particular image of bereavement, one of the countless cartoonish images from my childhood. Something about the very form of YouTube—its landing page an array of unmoving faces, its sidebar of "Up next" clips a vertiginous column of old friends, hanging one above the other—shares some of the suspended glamour and pathos of poor Ulysses' frozen comrades. There they wait for us to restore them.

The main premise of the cartoon is that Ulysses must voyage through the universe to find the Kingdom of Hades, whereupon his crew will return to life. This too reflects my approach to YouTube, since the way that I reanimate the past can feel like walking among the dead of the Underworld. In Homer's original, Odysseus travels to the realm of Hades to summon the shades with his sacrifices. According to the goddess Circe's directions, he digs a pit in the ground, a channel, and waits for the spirits to arrive. He first encounters his youngest crewmate, who has just died on Circe's island after falling drunkenly from a roof. "What are you doing here?" Odysseus asks him, wondering how he had managed to get to the Underworld so quickly from the island. Of course, one shouldn't put such logical questions to a ghost, but we soon hear it a second time, when Odysseus's mother—dead from a broken heart at her son's long absence—appears in front of him. This time, it is the ghost who puts the question to the mortal. "What are you doing here?" she asks her son, worried that Odysseus too has died.

"What are you doing here?" carries with it an air of trespass that can accompany any journey into the YouTube Time Machine. The controversial Article 13 of the new digital copyright law, just passed in the European Parliament, seeks to make YouTube and other platforms responsible for policing the illegal use of copyrighted content. Browsing videos invites an ethical feeling of infringement: Should I be able to hear this song or

watch this program for free? But beside this, isn't there also a sense that YouTube facilitates a return to a time that no longer belongs to us?

The shades of the Underworld won't speak to Odysseus until they have drunk from the blood of sacrificed animals. YouTube's conditions are less ceremonial, and the tax is on the side of the living—in my case it typically involves waiting out the first five seconds of an ad for Grammarly or Squarespace. The digital, unbloody ease with which YouTube revives the past, so much more nimbly than its DVD and VCR predecessors, invites us to become re-watchers of the same content. Indeed, quick repetition is a main feature of our new digital aesthetics. Whereas we use GIFs—those twitchy, looping clips—as public illustrations of our feelings or responses to events, an oft-repeated YouTube video is the GIF's private counterpart. Re-watching familiar videos can be a kind of secular prayer. There is comfort in the repetition, and the videos to which we give this repeated attention can feel deeply personal. We wouldn't necessarily want others to know that we return to them in this way. Aren't we wasting the time of our own lives? It's easy to attach embarrassment or shame to the act of re-watching.

What Has Been Lost?

Until a few months ago, when I worked myself into that uneasy, breathless state that is for me a common preliminary to the act of writing, I would turn to a vintage documentary on the novelist Toni Morrison from 1978. I know how to toggle through that old hour to find the short stretch that I'm looking for. With my thumb rooted in the trackpad, my index finger sways across the gray rink like a metal detector. Not there…no, that's too far, back a bit. Toni (as I presumptuously call her in my mind) is at this point an editor at Random House in New York City. She has just published her third novel, *Song of Solomon*. We see her laughing with colleagues, or sitting at her desk in the high-rise office building, with its consolingly predictable array of books, typewriter, and stacks of papers. A weary voiceover from Toni contrasts with a shot of her taking a business call, competent and stern. In the post-work drinking circle she laughs and jokes, but meanwhile there is her disembodied speech about how she's sick of the demands of work, of having to write at the "edges of the day." She wants to sit down "in the middle of the day and spend five hours at it, and not feel guilty."

While fashion is an obvious way of immediately locating old footage in time, we don't talk much about how the audiovisual qualities of

the footage itself are also a date stamp. The way cameras capture sunlight—how sharp or powdery or white or golden—or the subtle changes in tone that microphones give to voices, are historically specific. I love seeing Toni in her office in large part because the scene's natural light looks like the light that came from my television when I was very young. Mediated light is almost never like that now. The timbre of Toni's voice, and also the silence around it, the accidental hum and hiss of the recorded past, is of its time. Hearing it makes me feel my cheek against carpet, with some toy blocks scattered nearby. YouTube brings back this ancient light, these old ways of speaking.

Toni is in the back of a corporate car now, marking some papers. Her voiceover admits that she's been working for a long time and she's getting tired. She doesn't want to have to take on additional work teaching to make the money she needs to provide single-handedly for her two sons. She wants her writing to support her and make the time for more writing. As she points out cautiously, if the newly published *Song of Solomon* turns out to be more than just a critical success, then "it may make that possible for me." You want to shout through her car window: "It's going to happen, Toni!" *Song of Solomon* is indeed her first commercial hit. In this video, she's on the verge of great change, and by replaying it I cast her again and again to this glorious breach. The repetition acts like a centrifuge, separating out the sheer potential and contingency that is otherwise dissolved in every moment of our lives. Possibility here becomes almost palpable.

But as well as this centrifugal inspiration, YouTube has given us a new kind of emotion—not one of the major sentiments, perhaps, but certainly one born of these early digital years. I'm talking about *that feeling when* you realize that a cherished YouTube video has been taken down. You can perhaps sense what I'm about to say: One day recently I got ready to write in the safe knowledge that I wouldn't have to write just yet. No, before all that, I could pay a visit to the high-rise office where the late-70s sun comes through the window. I put in the search terms (predicted in the dropdown menu) and, among the gallery of Tonis, her face stalled in various expressions, there was an absence. I scrolled up and down, squinting at the upper thumbnails, before tumbling downwards, to where even Toni herself stopped showing up, to where all that was left were her fans, honorable but wholly unwanted, holding up a copy of *Beloved* or *Sula* and offering five-minute reviews. Are we ever more spiteful than at such moments of discovery?

There was no doubt she was gone. Toni on the verge of literary independence, stepping out into the Manhattan street. The loss of the video

from the past re-enacts the loss of the time it has temporarily returned to us. The removal is therefore a kind of double loss that, while certainly not devastating, adds a melancholy note to the day. For Freud, melancholia and mourning are both connected to a loss, but differ in how the loss is perceived. While a mourner is vividly aware of why he despairs, the source of a melancholic's lamentation can be harder to identify. As Freud writes in his famous essay on these two emotional states, with melancholia "one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss…has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost." It is this very indeterminacy that gives the lost YouTube video its melancholy afterimage. The sudden, unpleasant separation from an uplifting piece of archival footage is obvious, but the loss of the hidden treasures that the video unearths is a more nebulous kind of impoverishment. Even before it was taken down, my habit of re-watching in itself had features of classic melancholia. As the scholar Nouri Gana interprets Freud's relationship between loss and memory in a 2004 article, "The act of remembering can either devolve into fragmentary cycles of 'compulsive repeating' and pathological 'melancholia,' or build up toward a therapeutic process of 'working through' and 'mourning.'" Fragmentary cycles of compulsive repeating—a stark description of my adventures on YouTube!

My melancholy relationship to YouTube was formed during a time of grief. I "lost" my mother, as the euphemism goes, in 2010, when I was thirty. She left next to no digital trace. It was around that time that I established my predominant YouTube custom of watching and re-watching interviews with mostly women writers over the age of fifty. Now I have a regular roster: besides Morrison, there is A. S. Byatt, Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, Anne Enright. Knock yourself out, Freud! I love the different rhythms of their talk, as well as their shared levels of intelligence and humor. I invoke them as they are now, but also as their younger selves. YouTube supplies shades of all ages. They keep me company, to help stall those queasy moments when I have to continue on with my own sentences. I'm fond of YouTube for offering this kind of solace, even if it doesn't always feel healthy to be caught in these circuits of lost time, hearing the same words spoken in the same way, in the same rooms lit with the light of the past. For just as the spinning buffer icon signals the emergence of these women, I too feel that I'm circling around and around *them*, a melancholy prowler, looking for a person I'll never be able to find again, except in the private channels of memory. With each sting of YouTube's nostalgic puncta, it feels as if I'm drawing asymptotically nearer, approaching infinitely closer without ever reaching her. When

Odysseus meets his mother on the border of Hades, he can't understand why she won't embrace him. As Emily Wilson translates Odysseus's repeated attempts at contact: "three times her ghost flew from my arms, like shadows or like dreams."