EDITORIAL: MATERIAL HISTORIES OF TELEVISION

A sense of loss permeates the collection of articles in this issue. Loss has perhaps always accompanied television as an ephemeral medium caught within the transient everydayness of our societies. Traditionally television's sense of loss has nurtured discussions on television memories, archiving, preservation and re-use. Nowadays, however, new forms of loss are emerging in connection with television.

There is a growing accumulation of obsolescent technologies, once used in both consumption and production. There are the programmes themselves, preserved in storage media that have a limited life. The television industry has also left its material traces on the landscape. Evocative objects like toys and props are traded, sometimes for large amounts of money. While television is often seen as an ephemeral medium, the material traces of its history can be found everywhere, reminding us of what was and is no longer.

Rather than decrying television as it used to be, these new emergent forms of loss accompanying present-day television are productive research grounds as they elicit a timely question: where and what is television nowadays? Can we explore that question through the material traces that analogue television has left behind? As television is no longer at the centre of our media landscape, new places and new roles are being occupied by this older medium. It is this overarching question that we invite our readers to explore when navigating the articles in this issue.

Television's material culture offers a starting point into this exploration of television's current status. Artefacts and material traces are imbued with social relations.[1] They unearth for us the web of users, uses and meanings associated to television, both in its historical and present form. This edition of *VIEW* explores many ways in which television's material heritage can be repurposed or exploited, bringing to the fore new emergent uses for this older medium.

Deborah Chambers charts the relatively rapid cultural journey of the analogue domestic TV set from novel design icon to heritage item in her article "The Rise and Fall of the Analogue Television Set: From Modernity to Media Heritage". She explores how each iteration has given rise to new uses for the commonplace TV set. Sergio Minniti, Joshua Salazar and Jorge Verga also explore how television sets can be repurposed towards new uses and users within the current digital media ecology in their contribution "Implementing Low Cost Digital Libraries for Rural Communities by Re-functioning Obsolescent Television Sets: The *Offline-pedia* Project". They describe an innovative low-cost reuse of cathode ray TV sets to bring an offline version of Wikipedia to communities without internet connections. TV broadcasting in Ecuador has become digital, so many analogue TV sets have been discarded. This is a pilot for a 'Design Global, Manufacture Local' product for which there is a real need. It vividly demonstrates that 'obsolete' technologies have plenty of potential useability left in them.

Amy Holdsworth, Rachel Moseley and Helen Wheatley discuss children's television as a museum exhibit and a site of memory and nostalgia that helps connect with users in novel ways. Their public exhibition of ephemera from British children's TV enabled visitors to recall and share their own experiences of childhood, sometimes from fresh perspectives. Holdsworth et al.'s article captures the enduring cultural meaning of television that endows many of

1 Daniel Miller, "Theories of Things," in *Stuff*, Polity, 2010, pp. 42–78.

its objects with an aura of importance. They show how old television objects can be used to trigger recall of viewing experiences and generate new experiences of an old medium television.

Yet much of television's materiality remains problematic, often experienced as excess or ephemeral waste. The buildings that used to house TV enterprises present the least problems. They are easy to repurpose: the BBC's Wood Lane TV Centre, a world-leading building in the 1950s, has recently been converted into expensive flats and offices, marketed using their historical associations. But what about the vast heaps of discarded VHS tapes, thought to be more than can be played on the VHS tape heads that remain? Or the discarded piles of cathode ray TV sets, with their components containing lead and other problematic ingredients?

Jennifer Vanderburgh deals with the seemingly intractable problem of home VCR tape recordings in her article "Grounding TV's Material Heritage: Place-based Projects That Value or Vilify Amateur Videocassette Recordings of Television". Most people believe that they should throw them out, but many feel constrained by the question of whether they still have value, either personal or for 'the archive'. Vanderburgh examines the complicated attitudes to the value of VCR tapes, which underpins their current state of 'precarity'. She then examines a number of different practices of collection around VCR tapes, ending with an examination of *Project Get Reel*, which sees them as an environmental menace, difficult to recycle due to the way that they are constructed. This again reminds us of the environmental impact of television.

Sometimes the very ephemerality of television means that the material heritage is required to make the remaining cultural objects intelligible, as John Ellis, Tim Heath and Paul Marshall demonstrate in very different ways. They discuss the reuse of disused television production equipment to enable better understandings of how television came to be made and what the affordances of television's production technologies actually were. Their contributions point to the status of television's material artefacts – production equipment in this case - as historical sources that help retrace television's original contexts of users and uses. In his article "Filming for Television. How a 16mm Film Crew Worked together", John Ellis shows how television used to be made by reuniting old analogue equipment with the professionals who used to use it. His contribution makes us aware of how material traces and remnants of production artefacts have a great historiographical value as they help us retrieve 'absences' in television history. In this case, they reveal the historical settings of television-making that remained embedded within daily work routines of work and embodied interactions among people and between people and technologies.

Old production technologies also help retrieve hidden work practices of television personnel and tap into under-researched areas of television history. In his article "Television Sound Operators: Who Were They and What Exactly Did They Do?" Tim Heath unearths the working practices of television sound operators, whose contributions to television history have remained neglected under the guise of being considered 'routine' and 'unremarkable'. Paul Marshall's article "Making Old Television Technology Make Sense" illustrates how old production technologies connect us with former television engineers, whose technical skills can help television historians to access professional skills of analogue television that are fading away or becoming extinct. He argues that their technical knowledge of analogue electronics can enrich existent television narratives. All three articles emphasise the importance of hands on history practices using the technological heritage of television. Television studies have often neglected the materiality of television's actual production (rather than the institutional organisations behind it) because it involves an understanding of both engineering (as Marshall demonstrates) and the detailed working practices explored by both Ellis and Heath. These articles argue that television's old programming can be better understood by taking into account the material practices that brought them into existence. These hands on history practices require the continued existence of both the technologies and the skills that are required to bring them back to life.

Television's materiality and the question of archive remain intimately connected. The technological basis of television is constantly changing, and as Marshall, Ellis and Heath demonstrate in their different ways, the skills and technologies on which they depend both have temporary lives. Memory, both public and personal, has a longer timescale. Holdsworth et al. demonstrate the continuing evocative power of programming whose original material

substrate probably disappeared or degenerated several years ago. The materiality of television's past is not only evocative of personal pasts, it also brings to life the cultural power and reach of the institution of television.

The reach of television memory, and the materiality of television memory, is demonstrated by two further contributions. Ikäheimo and Äikäs discuss in their article "The Site of a Film Set as Material Heritage" an archaeological search for the remains of a culturally important historical drama from the 1982. This kind of memory work motivates the construction of theme parks and studio tours, like the studio tour discussed by Couldry.[2] Locations always matter, whether they are studios or the sites of specific shoots. Television is usually seen as a national or even transnational medium, but its inscription into places is always specific. Darren Ingram reminds us in his article "Culture under Threat. Minority Hyperlocal Cable Television in Finland" that there have always been other, located, uses of television, beyond the dominant national broadcasting model. In examining the brief flowering of hyperlocal television in the Swedish speaking communities of Finland, he reflects on the precarity of television and its practices: "Can new technologies that encourage hyperlocal media contribute to the demise of hyperlocal media?" This question highlights the way in which the materiality of television's heritage as a whole seems to be under threat from the new materiality of television's future. This is contributes to the tone of loss or regret that runs through the articles in this issue.

Old consumer technologies of television that were once ubiquitous are now commonplace and that in itself comes with challenges. These technologies seem disposable precisely because they are so familiar. Technology manufacturers have not helped here. They have instituted cycles of renewal that ensure that TV sets and allied consumer technologies have to be replaced before they have reached the end of their useable life. Hence they can be reused. Even the heritage status of the analogue TV set now seems to be endangered. Museums are, as Chambers says, "reassessing media collections and principles of display". Indeed, an article for this collection on an unusual public display of TV monitors was withdrawn when the museum for which it was created decided that it no longer wished to exhibit it.

The rapid journey of TV technologies from cultural necessities to no longer wanted detritus takes centre stage in the collection of articles in this issue. Rather than considering that an endpoint in our exploration of television nowadays, we encourage our readers to use it as a starting point and further explore how material remnants and debris of analogue television provide a fresh platform for (re)discovering the new places and roles occupied by the old medium in the current media landscape. Just as Michel de Certeau[3] looked at waste products as traces of practices embedded into everyday life, we can reflect on how the material artefacts that television leaves behind help us tap into the 'lost everydayness' of this old medium. How does television's detritus help us retrace original contexts of television's uses and users? What historical narratives of television have we overlooked in what we have discarded as trivial and unremarkable in television's past? How can we retrieve all this by 'going through' television's material remains?

With these broader questions in mind, we wish our readers an inspiring journey through the collection of articles in this issue that explores uses of television's material heritage.

John Ellis and Dana Mustata

B i o g r a p h i e s

John Ellis is a professor in the Media Arts Department of Royal Holloway University of London. His book 'Visible Fictions' (1982) was an attempt to understand cinema and TV informed by a materialist perspective. He worked as

2 Nick Couldry, *The Place of Media Power*, Routledge, 2000.
3 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, 1984.

a TV producer through Large Door Productions during the 1980s and 1990s making programmes as diverse as the Visions series on world cinema (1982-5) to This Food Business (1989) and Riding the Tiger (1997,1999) on the handover to Hong Kong to China. His publications since that date include 'Seeing Things' (2000) and 'Documentary: Witness and Self Revelation' (2012). He was the principal researcher on the ERC funded ADAPT project and is chair of Learning on Screen.

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