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Retelling the Past with Broadcast Archives

Context Makes Sense

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Abstract: The publication of audiovisual archives asks many questions about the meaning of documents. Publishing a video archive on a Web site, for example, is a re-contextualisation. The loss of cultural references needed to understand a document implies the necessity to re-contextualise documents. This means adding elements, such as titles, descriptions and other information. This paper analyzes the case of a video published by Ina on its Web platform Ina.fr and its Blog, the Blognote. The video, dated 1st January 1947, is a report envisioning a future when surveillance cameras would be installed on the streets in Paris. These two instances of publication offer two different views on the editorialization of video archives.
Keywords: Video Archives, Recontextualization, Remediation, Semiotics

At the turn of the 21st century, Ina, the French national broadcast archive planned a 15-year digitisation strategy for its collections, giving priority to public access and availability of its heritage, notably for a younger, web literate, generation. Building on that policy, the Ina web video platform, Ina.fr, was launched in 2006 to provide on-line access to the general public of a vast sample of videos (31 000 hours, 330 000 video items) available from 50 years of broadcast archives. On this new platform, once endangered broadcast archives were re-purposed, re-contextualised, sometimes re-edited and somehow 'revamped' for contemporary viewers. The case study presented hereafter relies on original broadcast archive material published in various contexts on this platform. It focuses on context and interpretation from a semiotic point of view.

'there is a ghost, but nobody knows it's a ghost?'
'Well... not till afterward, at any rate'
'Till afterward?'
'Not till long, long afterward.'

Edith Wharton, Afterward

1   Introduction

As Edith Wharton tells us, there are things that cannot be seen clearly when they happen. Distance is needed to understand certain events. There is a ghost in *Afterward* but like the characters in the story, we will not know it is one, 'not till long, long afterward' anyway. That is, when new facts have occurred which cast a different light on our memories. The lens of the present offers a different focus on the past.

Historical distance can thus be considered an asset for grasping things past rather than a gap that hinders their understanding. Carlo Ginzburg wrote that the past speaks to us, not because of its proximity but because of its distance. According to Ginzburg, the past is considered as such when, and because, it is different from the present.[1] That difference is meaningful, as indeed, the past will not be experienced if it is not any different from the present.

This article will demonstrate how, from a semiotic point of view, re-contextualisation is needed when a video is published and the initial context of its production and reception is lost. Historical distance is an issue for understanding and interpreting broadcast archives and viewers thus need relevant items to enable its understanding. The editorializing of archive material must, therefore, provide keys for interpretation in order to grant 'archival value' to the document. From that perspective, the historical distance creates a gap labelled the 'intelligibility gap',[2] when cultural references are not available to interpret a document.

Yet, following Ginzburg's statement, we shall see how historical distance is actually not an issue but adds value to re-contextualised archive material. When a video is re-purposed in a new editorial environment the distance between past, when the document was produced, and the present, when it is viewed, is all the more conspicuous and creates value and meaning for the archive document.

1.   Context : Ina.fr

Two semiotic issues relate to the process of repurposing broadcast archives - editorialising and re-contextualising them and then making them available on various media, notably the web.

On the one hand, there is the above-mentioned 'intelligibility gap', on the other hand the so-called 'remediation effect'. Remediation is a term coined by Bolter & Grusin,[3] which refers to the representation of an old media within a new one. In order to bridge the 'intelligibility gap', archives are re-contextualised through remediation. From a semiotic point of view, different remediations of one given document will supposedly cause different interpretations. The following case study will highlight how historical distance forges meaning and may be by-passed by remediation thus adding value to the document.

2.   Case Study: ʹLa Vidéosurveillance Avant Lʹheureʹ

The video 'La vidéosurveillance avant l'heure',[4] available on the Ina.fr online platform, is an excerpt from a longer 1947 report which was originally meant to be screened in cinemas before the main motion picture. The original report, which was shot in the studios of the national broadcast office, presents the technical background of television, which was then an emerging media, and verges on anticipation by hinting at a possible future when cameras could become handy devices in people's everyday lives. The selected excerpt shows how cameras could be used for 'crime watch', enabling Paris police officers to survey the street from their office, rushing onto the scene of the crime only in case of law infringement. This device supposedly allowed for easier crime control and downsizing of police staff.

This case study focuses on an Ina post of this video on the Ina.fr Blognote. In this instance, the aim of remediation is to connect a point of view from the past with one from the present, in an effort to make the video understandable today by comparing different historical perspectives on the issue.

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1 Carlo Ginzburg, Wooden Eyes. Nine reflections on distance, Columbia University Press, 2001.
2 Bruno Bachimont, 'La présence de l'archive: réinventer et justifier' Intellectica, 53-54, 2010 1/2.
3 Remediation is the representation of an old medium in a new medium. Hypermediacy is a category of remediation where the interface underlines its role of intermediation between the old media represented and the new media which represents it. It's a sort of 'mise en abîme' of the interface. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin. *Remediation Understanding New Media*, MIT Press, 1999, p. 45.
4 'Vidéosurveillance ahead of time'.

The following semiotic analysis considers the construction of interpretative patterns through significant elements in the document (the video) and its context (the web page). Different contexts will thus produce different patterns (i.e. different titles will lead to different interpretations of a video). The context elements – i.e. summary or title - constitute elements for interpretative hypothesis.

3.   Document Analysis

For a more comprehensive demonstration, we will first analyse the extract outside of its context. As stated above, the video depicts a hypothetical future with surveillance cameras trained on the Parisian streets. The first images show pedestrians peacefully strolling in a street lined with poles that may well be hiding cameras; police officers are sitting in armchairs and scrutinising screens. The voiceover asserts: 'in police headquarters, focused officers will observe, on multiple screens, what goes on in the city'. The screens display trivial everyday life scenarios of Parisians. Here the images are just an illustration of what is narrated by the voiceover.

This introduction sets the scene for a future when surveillance cameras will protect citizens. From this fantasised situation, a short fiction follows: the pursuit of a thief tracked on screen through the eyes of the 'focused' officers. The whole story unfolds from the point of view of the surveillance camera. In order to give the idea that anything occurring in the streets is made visible: everything is potentially recorded and displayed on a screen and monitored by the authorities.

A more thorough analysis of this short fiction is worthwhile. People are seen running on screen and the voiceover warns: 'Thief'. The video shows the thief running away. Then focus is then turned back onto the screens in the police headquarters. These are presented as the source of the enunciation in the video within a video. The voice-over underlines the features of the surveillance device: 'Why run after a thief? He can be watched so easily on screen trying to escape, turning in a street to the left, then right.' The officers send two policemen to catch him. They guide the policemen through the streets, tracking the thief from the screens. Images of the surveillance screens alternate with images of the thief escaping with policemen pursuing him. Once he's spotted the policemen run after him. 'Go and get him', says the voiceover. The music eases the tension. Back inside the police headquarters office, on the screens, pedestrians are shown strolling on the street, they meet and greet each other, one of the 'focused officers' lights a cigarette.

The video highlights two topics: *citizen security* and *control through surveillance*. Forecasting a futuristic but possible hypothesis (anticipation), it explains how citizen security can be achieved through live monitoring of streets with cameras. As the short fiction is shown from the screens of the police headquarters, the viewer is in a position of control, assuming that point of view and sharing 'visual knowledge' of the situation with the officers in the report.

To understand the occurrence of different time structures within one document, the narrative can be reorganised as follows. The video frames a world that forecasts a Future 1 in coherence with the Present 1 of the original broadcast (1947). Watching this archive with contemporary eyes, Future 1 is envisioned from a Present 2 perspective (our present). Future 1 is so likely to have happened that the surveillance cameras from the original video are available in Present 2 (today). Future 1 somehow matches Present 2. But why do these structures finally overlap, yet not perfectly match? The surveillance camera system belongs to both time structures, yet in each context the viewer holds a different point of view. It is not the existence of the system that is questioned from the Present 2 perspective, but it is its appraisal that has changed. Facts envisioned in the report have actually occurred since then, but our perspective on them has shifted. We might not see surveillance cameras as an asset for security anymore but as an issue for privacy. The remediation process underlines this difference as will be developed hereafter.

4.   Document Context

The video has also been published as a post on Ina's blog. What is at stake, *in that case*, is a double remediation. The first appears within the original broadcast material: a short fiction that can be viewed onscreen in the police headquarters featured in the report. The screens displayed in the police headquarters 'remediate' a short fiction between the viewer and the story. The second is the remediation of the original broadcast published on the Ina blog, *Blognote*. It is embedded in a framework that provides sense and context for the original document. Indeed, significant elements in the *Blognote* relate to a thematic bias that expands beyond the initial themes of citizen security and control. In particular two additional topics emerge, that of excessive control and indirectly that of privacy.

On the blog, the video is entitled 'Big Brother, version 1947'. The description continues:

Did you know that tomorrow the streets in Paris will be deprived of police officers? We are in 1947, the Loppsi 2 law does not exist yet and nevertheless, a video surveillance system is envisioned: TV cameras, 'focused police officers' and that's it. Back to the future.
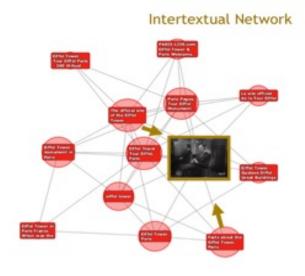
The literary reference in the title, *Big Brother, version 1947*, obviously hints at the famous novel entitled *1984*. Yet, George Orwell's book was published in 1949, actually two years after the report was shown in cinemas. The title of the video on the blog thus draws a parallel between 1984 and the year 1947 when the report was originally viewed. It emphasises an inter-textual reference that could not have occurred when the report was first broadcast and which refers to the current fear of an over-monitored society. This underlines a shift in focus over time.

The second item in the description published on the blog is a reference to the Loppsi 2 law connecting the video with hot news in France. In March 2011, President Sarkozy's Government voted a law on internal security, which notably aimed to allow implementation of urban surveillance camera systems. The law has been highly debated and several issues were very controversial, especially privacy and a fear that the Government would be able to monitor and track citizens.

The document intended for viewers in 1947 and focusing on control and security is thus presented here within a new cultural background which brings up two other issues: excessive control and privacy. The relationship between these two sheds light on the shift in values that has occurred and underlines the difference between present and past as far as focus is concerned.

5.   The Intelligibility Gap

The issue of re-contextualisation can be analyzed as follows. References are needed to understand archive material. These references can be presented as an intertextual network where every knot in the network is a different document that helps understand those related. From a semiotic point of view, the network of references that is needed to clearly understand a document relate to cultural references available in the media sphere (articles, other videos, etc.).[5]
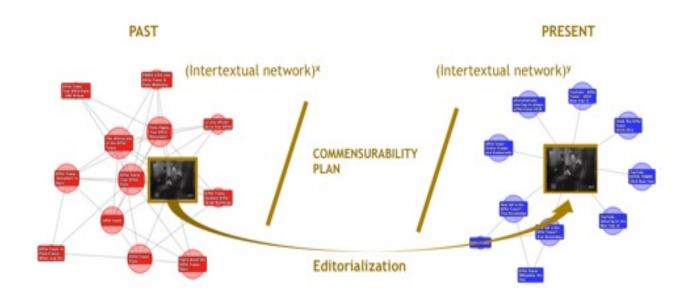

The intelligibility gap thus relates to a change in context: when a document is embedded in a new intertextual network linking several documents to each other, if the initial network is lost, much relevant information needs to be remembered in order to guarantee a perfect understanding of the document.

An instance of recontextualisation on the Ina.fr platform for a key historical archive is presented below as a way of demonstrating and emphasising this concept. It is indeed not easy to grasp, for example, the meaning of Charles de Gaulle's sentence in 1958, when during a Press conference he describes himself as 'being too old to

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5 We refer here to the notion of 'encyclopedy' by Umberto Eco, Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language, Indiana University Press, 1984 and the definition of culture as a network of significance by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, 1973, p. 5.

start a career as a dictator'. For a better understanding, this needs to be related to its historical context if it is not to sound like just a joke. 1958 is the year when de Gaulle was back in charge and nominated 'President du conseil' by the French Parliament. This happened after a national crisis following a *putsch* in Algeria (then a French colony) and the fear of a possible *coup d'État* in Paris. This fear must be made explicit by the remediation of the document for the reference to a possible dictatorship of Général De Gaulle to be grasped by contemporary viewers. The putsch in Algeria and the demonstrations against de Gaulle in Paris are knots of an intertextual network that require reconstruction so that the fear of an authoritarian Government in Paris is understandable. De Gaulle's sentence was an attempt to reassure both left wing journalists and a large part of the public that his office would not verge on dictatorship. This short sentence might sound like a joke today, but actually relates to a complex historical situation that needs being remembered in order to grant archival value to the document.

6.   Editorialisation As An Intertextual Matrix

From a semiotic point of view, editorialisation is thus a question of commensurability between two intertextual networks. The document referring to a partially lost intertextual network is transposed into a new network and linked to several other items.

The historical distance can thus be represented by the difference between each intertextual network. The issue of recontextualising broadcast archives lies in the fact that a document belonging to a past intertextual network is actually considered from a new perspective and becomes part of a current (present?) intertextual network . Which, as Paolucci observes, is a common issue in 'cultural semiotics': that of the 'construction of local commensurabilities among heterogeneous systems'.[6] Recontextualisation is about managing commensurabilities between different intertextual networks that are generally not time coherent.

Yet, the intelligibility gap implies that in order to editorialise a document, mere reconstruction of a former intertextual network is not sufficient. The problem is that present times cannot be put aside. As new events occur, they will keep shaping new knots in an ever-changing intertextual network. And these new knots might change our perspective on the document and its interpretation. From that point of view, each editorialisation produces a new semiotic discourse and a new meaning. Any institution repurposing content in a new editorial context may indeed be considered as a medium per se which forges sense and acts as a publisher, as Roei Amit, chef editor of Ina has pointed out.[7] From that perspective, archivists are no longer gatekeepers granting or refusing access to the archives but editors re-publishing documents through remediation processes.[8]

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6 Claudio Paolucci, *Strutturalismo e interpretazione*, Bompiani, 2010, p.230.
7 Roei Amit, 'Ina.fr', BBF 2, 2007, p. 44-45.
8 Julia Noordegraaf, 'Who Knows Television? Online Access and the Gatekeepers of Knowledge', *Critical Studies in Television: Scholarly Studies in Small Screen Fictions.* Special issue 'Television Archives: Accessing TV History', eds Lez Cooke and Robin Nelson, Vol. 5, No. 2, Autumn 2010, 1-19.

Remediation is then drafting this commensurability mapping between two different intertextual networks in order to provide intelligibility to a document that has lost it: a kind of matrix that grants sense to the document. The video becomes meaningful thanks to the new context. Title and description in the *Blognote* post mentioned above are knots from a network that throw a bridge between present and past. In the context of online media, these intertextual references can be materialised within the web page, through title, description and links.[9]

This type of remediation uses the intelligibility gap and the historical distance as a rhetorical bias. The past speaks to us, but it speaks to us because of its distance. It is the difference in value and perspective on a given topic – e.g. that of surveillance camera system - that highlights the difference between present and past. And the past comes out more clearly because of that difference.

Biography

Matteo Treleani is a PhD candidate at Paris Diderot University in agreement with the Institut national de l'audio-visuel. He got his degree in semiotics at Bologna University in 2007. His research, supervised by Marc Vernet and Bruno Bachimont, investigates the role of context in the publication of archive videos. He teaches new media and television aesthetics at Marne la Vallée University. He's also part of the selection committee of the International Jean Rouch Festival (Ethnographic Film Committee) since 2007.

Claude Mussou has been working in the collection and research departments of the French National Institute of the Audiovisual (Ina). She is currently manager of the team in charge of the Web Legal Deposit at Ina. She graduated in American studies and has a Master degree in journalism from the Sorbonne. Claude is a member of the FIAT / IFTA Television Studies Commission and is involved in bridging the gap between archives and academics.

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9 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, MIT Press, 2001.