EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF MEDIA STUDIES
www.necsus-ejms.org
Published by Amsterdam University Press

The way we watched: Vintage television programmes, memories, and memorabilia

Helen Piper

NECSUS 4 (2): 123–142
DOI: 10.5117/NECSUS2015.2.PIPE

Abstract

This paper explores television viewing memories of a kind that have rarely been acknowledged, whether in formal histories of television or by the ubiquitous archive 'clip show'. Much of the academic work that explicitly addresses questions of television and memory has been disproportionately preoccupied with viewers' recall of historical events. Here, the author draws on a viewer reminiscence project to emphasise how favourite entertainment shows once integral to family life in the 1960s and 1970s are today bound up with the more complex and diffuse emotions that surround the everyday past. The author also uses the idea of 'vintage', specifically as a designation for something that 'belongs' to a certain period, to contemplate the connections between memories of programmes and the sentiments evoked by the vestiges of television-related material culture (including 'the box' itself and other items of memorabilia). Both reminiscence and the acquisition of vintage goods are ways of constructing the cultural past, and both differ markedly in form and outcome from the re-consumption of the television archive that is routinely promoted by broadcasters and DVD distributors. The paper will conclude that as critical re-engagement with the extant moving image text is a poor substitute for the original performance, reminiscence and vintage material culture might offer more effective insight into past engagement with television. For similar reasons the study of both memory and materiality may provide appropriate intellectual contexts to complement the study of old programmes in text-centred critical/aesthetic discourse.

Keywords: television, memory, vintage, family viewing, archive, British light entertainment programmes, clip shows, oral history, materiality, broadcasting history, textual analysis, Remembering Television project, memorabilia, affect

> 'People die, sure,' my mother was saying. 'But it's so heart-breaking and unnecessary how we lose things. From pure carelessness. Fires, wars. The Parthenon, used as a munitions storehouse. I guess that anything we manage to save from history is a miracle.' – Donna Tartt, *The Goldfinch*[1]

Formal histories of television and broadcasting have attended more assiduously to the 'big picture' than to the micro possibilities of engagement, avoiding the question of what television has meant, if anything, to the successive generations who devoted so many leisure hours watching it. Instead, television historiography has veered upwards towards the epic, the aesthetic, and the political, focusing on nation-states, hegemonies, institutions, advertisers, producers, and, selectively, programmes. Asa Briggs' gargantuan five-volume *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* is a notable instance of this, but in its more modest way so too is the BFI undergraduate primer *The Television History Book*, wherein it is equally difficult to locate the idea of viewing as a socially- and culturally-meaningful activity. There is indeed a section on 'Audiences', but with a determined focus on how audiences have been measured, addressed, manipulated, and studied rather than how the experience of watching television may itself have shifted over time. Although the so-called 'audience turn' in television studies is now itself decades old, ethnographic work in this category has rarely been retrospective and continues to privilege the most visible contemporary practices of engagement and (online) participation.

There are some important exceptions to these scholarly flows of interest, and recent years have seen the emergence of what Bourdon and Kligler-Vilenchik describe as the 'small but substantial body of research [that] has been devoted to memories of television viewing'.[2] A project undertaken by Tim O'Sullivan in the late 1980s was an early demonstration of how viewers' recollections might be used to address 'an important missing dimension in the history of British television';[3] it has since been followed by other culturally-specific investigations that reveal transnational commonalities, as reflected upon in articles by Alexander Dhoest, Cecilia Penati, Annika Lepp, and Mervi Pantti. Other significant research would include the Australian Research Council-funded 'People's History' project,[4] also Jérôme Bourdon's field work with both French and Israeli television viewers, which provides an influential methodological model with its particular and sustained focus on 'life stories' and typology of memory modes.[5] Notwithstanding those cited, there have been few attempts to call upon the reminiscences of ordinary viewers for historical insight into particular

genres, performers, programmes, or, indeed, the pleasures of watching them. As I shall observe, even work focused on the relations between television and memory has tended to privilege particular critical preoccupations, such as the mediation of public information and worldly historical events.

By contrast, it is in pursuit of the felt, lived, and remembered experience of regular viewing that this paper will examine two of the key activities by which shared cultural pasts are often constructed in the popular imagination: reminiscence, and the handling and acquisition of material artefacts. One way in which the relative abstractions of memory and the concreteness of 'things' may be productively brought (and thought) together is with the somewhat fluid notion of 'vintage', particularly in the sense of the term which refers to an item (or programme, or cultural activity) as 'belonging' to a particular historical period. Expressions of memory and vintage goods may equally serve as sources of 'unofficial knowledge'[6] about the periods from which they derive; they carry traces of the lived quotidian and may evoke similar ambivalent emotions in the present. Indeed, vintage may well be to heritage as memory is to history.

Vintage collectibles are generally personal rather than monumental and tend to lack the gravitas of 'antiques', usually being of greater sentimental than financial value. As such, they may be said to mind the gap between the remembered past and the official and documented 'histories' suggested by museum artefacts. As José van Dijck argues, individual recall is not necessarily a personalised version of collective memory; it may also be considered 'an act of negotiation or struggle between self and society'.[7] Like vintage goods, archive television programmes have a significance that transcends their textual form, yet they often go unrecognised by various systems of official discourse that impact on private lives and identities. The particular line of enquiry I shall be following here has developed out of a recent British Academy-supported research project titled 'Remembering Television' (RT), which gathered memories of light entertainment shows. Somewhat incidental to its intended outcomes, the RT project also exposed interesting similarities between the ways many of these viewers wanted to remember television and the sentiments they extended to the vintage equipment and memorabilia that survived it. This essay will develop the argument that the intersection between the abstract and the material is a productive one and that both are revealingly important modes by which we, as audiences, 'construct an idea of continuity between self and others',[8] contributing to broader narratives of television and the debates over its past, present, and future.

1 Mediating the past

The prominence given in studies of television and memory to landmark events, from Apollo 11 to 9/11, reflects a longstanding critical concern with television's mediation of current affairs and the 'real' empirical world. Aside from familiar charges of distortion, bias, and propaganda,[9] the relentless 'historical present' of television news coverage is often cited as the root cause of the medium's allegedly *amnesiac* tendencies, leading to apocalyptic accusations of its capacity to 'collapse memory'[10] – or, to quote Baudrillard's notorious accusation: to offer a sense of 'real time' comprised of 'useless' images that simply block 'up the screen hole through which escapes the substance of events'.[11] One can raise objections to such characterisations, perhaps levelled in the first instance at the methodologies that underpin them. As Bourdon and Kligler-Vilenchik note, they generally 'start not from social agents who remember, but from the cultural texts supposedly fostering amnesia'.[12] The authors' point here is that what social audiences do/not or will/not remember can never be read from programme texts alone. Although I am more interested in viewers' recollections of the light programming at the other end of the 'sobriety – entertainment' spectrum[13] to mediated worldly events, the same methodological cautions must be made. As Creeber argues, textual analysis 'on its own is rarely enough',[14] and its limitations are exacerbated when re-viewing the past performances for which the contemporary critic's 'one interpretation among many'[15] is also historically de-contextualised and any sense of simultaneous collective engagement is no longer possible.

Text-based methodologies are also restricted by the contexts in which old programmes may now be re-encountered. Penati notes that 'in the memories of early Italian TV viewers, only a few programmes stand out, and curiously they all belong to the popular entertainment genre',[16] inferring that such shows may have had more social and emotional impact than critical discourses about value and public service ever cared to acknowledge. Nevertheless, in the official archives of many nations serious genres such as news and current affairs tend to be more diligently preserved for public access than more popular forms of programming. The implied criteria that determine which programmes are excluded have prompted Darian-Smith and Turnbull to suggest that 'the television archive can function as a technology of memory'.[17] In Britain, public resources are dwarfed by the extensive back catalogues of broadcasters (notably the BBC and ITV) who have an interest in their commercial exploitation, making it more likely that extant programmes from light entertainment and drama genres

will be made available in a form that is remediated (for broadcast) or repackaged (for DVD sale). The archived recordings in open access on the BBC website typically privilege the reporting of news, history, and society over entertainment.[18]

That said, and somewhat paradoxically, it is precisely the commercial imperative to plunder and remediate their archives that encourages broadcasters, unlike academic historians, to routinely solicit and deploy memory testimonies in their presentation of the televisual past. Typically, first-hand accounts will be shown within the contemporary framework of the archive clip show, which makes conventional use of 'talking heads' as authorised witnesses, there to recount anecdotes or offer expert commentary on segments of old shows. Of course, these contributors are never 'ordinary' viewers, although their memories may pre-date their celebrity or expert status and may therefore purport to speak of an ordinary viewing experience (that is, without inside knowledge or professional expertise). These clip shows tend to divide into two mutually-exclusive categories: one designed to celebrate a particular genre, show, or performer (s), as in *The Showbiz Set* (Channel 4, 2002), *The Greatest TV Comedy Moments* (Channel 5, 2005), *The Story of Light Entertainment* (BBC, 2006), or *The Story of Variety with Michael Grade* (BBC, 2011); and another which aspires to critique and scrutiny of the past. A key example of the latter might be the recent documentary mini-series *It Was Alright in the 1970s* (Channel 4, 2014-present), which features television personalities of different ages, firmly anchored in a studio set bedecked with vintage 1970s furniture and properties, as they watch programmes from the era, specifically those that have been selected for their casual depictions of smoking, drinking, sexism, racism, homophobia, and lasciviousness towards underage girls. The contributors' reactions most commonly express shock, surprise, and humour, alongside many exhortations of how much society has changed within living memory.

Such orchestrated retrospection clearly directs attention to past programmes through the prism of contemporary social mores and norms, although this is not without interest for the contemporary viewer. In this instance, the distance of time has allowed a degree of critical reflection on the influence of popular culture and commensurate shifts in social attitudes. For example, David Aaronovitch diagnoses that 'part of the genesis of things like the Savile affairs' was that 'the culture of the times seemed to suggest to them that this was a perfectly valid way of looking at young people'.[19] Such reflection aside, the primary objective of this form of programming is still, unavoidably, the construction of a scandalous past.

Fig. 1: Jenny Éclair watches Butterflies (*BBC 1978-1983*). *Images from: It Was Alright in the 1970s* (*Channel 4, 2014*).

Fig. 2: Shappi Khorsandi reviews representations of race. Images from: It Was Alright in the 1970s (*Channel 4, 2014*).

Although the conceit is that the viewer may adopt the position of Walter Benjamin's 'distanced observer',[20] the resemblance, perhaps, is merely gestural. In this case the contradictions have been encoded with a degree of self-reflexivity, as several of the celebrity guests – notably those old enough to remember watching at the time of the original broadcast – are clearly disturbed by the loose slippage of past and present, alluding to past transgressions as 'harmless' or 'shameful', or speaking of wanting to again put on their 'Seventies head' in order to comment. As the comedian Mark Watson concludes, 'something is really only offensive in its moment'.

2 Remembering the past

David Cockburn reasons that the act of remembering is a state, not an event or trace from which we may find our way back to the truth of what occurred. 'One who remembers an event is one who already knows what happened because he observed it.'[21] Engaging with archive television by reviewing it is therefore problematic because it plunges the viewer into a new state that may efface the original experience through re-observation, causing 'knowledge' to be readjusted and the text to be reinterpreted. Whereas this may be a justifiable exercise if the objective is to make sense of how times have changed or why the likes of Jimmy Savile escaped justice, it may lead to historiographic judgements that are dangerously anachronistic. Television entertainment texts are not transcendental works of art that endure across time – they are the documentary record of performative engagements that should be understood in all their momentary contingency. Shifts in technical, social, and aesthetic expectations mean it is simply no longer possible or rewarding to watch these shows as they would once have been viewed. As artefacts they are, to some extent, already lost to us.

The Remembering Television project took as its focus people's memories of the light entertainment programming showcased in the peak time early-to-mid-evening schedules of British television broadcasters from 1960 (when approximately 70% of British households had a television) to 1985 (when video cassette recorders had become widely available and time-shifting began to permanently alter viewing habits).[22] Entertainment shows broadcast between these dates would never have been destined for perpetuity, and no one could have envisaged a future when some of them might be accessed again at will. Mindful of Joe Moran's admission that 'the "real" history of watching television […] is ultimately too vast and unrec-

orded to be told',[23] the ambition of the project was modest: to gather suggestive evidence and provide opportunities for viewers to share their often equivocal experience of popular entertainment as part of a family, but to do so outside of the fixed frameworks of celebratory nostalgia or critique promoted by television broadcasters. There was an expectation that such memories might also yield insights into the place of television in family life and to the forms of affective engagement between viewers and the genre of light entertainment.

Information was solicited at sociable group gatherings during which participants were shown memory stimuli[24] and invited to discuss their spontaneous reminiscences of television viewing with one another.[25] Memory is a fallible source of historical fact,[26] but in this case the historical accuracy (or inaccuracy) of participants' recollections was far less important than the emotional associations attached to the remembered shows. The primary qualification of those that took part was that they should have watched British television in a family environment for at least some of this time. Their memories will be cited below without names but according to the group workshop within which they were expressed: Group One, comprising the eldest participants (most in their early 80s and predominantly female); Group Two, the largest (mixed gender respondents whose ages ranged from 60 to early 70s); and Group Three, the youngest (evenly weighted in terms of gender, aged 48 to 60 years old).[27] As principal investigator and facilitator I took a position of participant-observer, engaging in and steering discussion if necessary, having also been a viewer of British television entertainment for some of the period in question.

Sue Turnbull has already observed how a popular history of television will inevitably expand into something far greater, and she notes how the ARC Discovery project in Australia quickly began to develop into 'a history of embodied practice that encompasses the experience of what it was like to live in Australian then and now – or rather how that experience has come to be constructed in the remembering'.[28] Similarly, the memory testimonies solicited by the RT project generally situate television within more extensive personal histories that in turn reveal a great deal about postwar British social life, shifting value systems, and generational divides. All the British participants happily supported a popular characterisation of the period as one of 'mass' collective viewing, and by consensus most remembered television as central to social and family life. Interestingly, those least likely to consider it as having been vital to their own families were those in Group One, whose memories – particularly of the 1960s – were often a blur of domestic labour, attending to young children, or in the

case of the men, long working hours and unsociable shifts. Typically, for one elderly lady, it had simply been 'a job to survive' back then, and like many others she had far fonder memories of long-serving television and radio personalities than of programmes watched at any particular time. It is pertinent that this age group acquired their first televisions as adults, having grown up under the shadow of recession and then war during the 1930s and 1940s, when radio was the dominant medium. Although it is usually television (particularly during its 1960 to 1980s heyday of collective viewing) that is credited as the 'glue that binds', the value attributed to its bonding power was consistently expressed in the strongest terms by those with the most vivid memories of their own *childhood* viewing.

In all cases television figures prominently in personal narratives of growing up or growing older – but it was the generation often described as 'baby boomers' (born between 1946 and 1964) who had, as one lady volunteered, 'grown up with telly', who seemed to have the most affection for past viewing in its generality. A comparison of the sentiments expressed by those within this age bracket reveals that there are also recognisable common patterns to the emotional memories of popular culture viewed at different life stages. If the most loved programmes were always those first viewed as a child (including shows that were not necessarily aimed at children), then the most derided were almost always watched as a teenager. A typically minor but telling instance of this arose during one of a number of discussions about the BBC show *Generation Game* during its initial incarnation in the 1970s. Reminiscences focused on the respective attractions of the hosts Bruce Forsyth (1971-77) or Larry Grayson (1978-82), citing the games, plays, oft-recalled 'conveyor belt', and all the viewing rituals that surrounded the show. Although memories were unanimously fond amongst those who remembered watching it as children (as, in other groups, amongst those who watched it with their own children), a more singular view was expressed by the only man in Group Three to have been a late teenager (17) when the series began, and who emphatically recalled his immediate rejection of it as 'appointment to miss' television.

Similarly ambivalent sentiments were expressed about teenage experiences of the *Royal Variety Performance*. This live theatrical show began in 1912, has been held annually in London since the 1920s,[29] and has been televised (either live or as an edited programme) since 1960, invariably receiving extraordinarily high ratings. The most affectionate memories of watching this show were actually expressed by participants in Group Two, particularly of times when they were living in their own homes with their

own newly-acquired television set, by which time several had infant children. As one man summarised:

> [t]hings like this fell into your annual calendar, it was like the Miss World competition, and you looked forward to [them]… The Royal Variety Performance was one of those. (M, Group Two)

This attitude contrasted with those a little younger in Group Three, who had watched television since early childhood but who soon began to identify with pop and rock music culture, associating variety entertainment with their parents' outmoded tastes ('I used to hear the theme music to *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* and groan!'). For this mid-to-late baby boomer generation annual gala events that deliberately addressed a cross-demographic audience were generally best avoided:

> [i]t would go on for about two hours. There was usually just one person or act you wanted to see, like the Beatles,[30] so you'd have to get called to come down, so you didn't have to sit through the rest of it. Actually called to come down … like a paging service! […] Didn't want to watch the rest of it, God no! (M, Group Three)

Although the youngest of the three groups recalled arguing with their parents, the eldest group were most likely to remember disputes with spouses, most of which occurred after their children had grown up.[31] The age of the participants aside, television's emergence as an object of conflict and focus for dissent seemed to become more pronounced the longer it was in the family home and the more taken for granted as an institution it became. Although no images were shown to prompt discussion of *Top of the Pops*, this long-running series was cited spontaneously and repeatedly by many, either as an example of viewing that was never missed,[32] as the only occasion when they were allowed to choose the evening programme, and/or as a regular source of inter-generational conflict or teasing:

> *Top of the Pops* was an institution. My father used to take great delight in saying, 'They all look the same, it all sounds the same. Why are they wearing football boots!' That was his favourite when Glam Rock came in. (F, Group Three)

Many recalled (both with and without affection) their parents complaining about the music programming aimed at the young and regarded in turn

the preferences of that older generation as a personal threat to the fragile, emerging identities of their teenage selves and sense of difference they were developing. By contrast, shows viewed prior to becoming teenagers were excused for having been enjoyed at a moment of innocence. Similarly, during reflections on particular performers and shows there was quite often a degree of hesitation, as if participants needed to put some distance between what they had found funny at the time and their current, more discerning, critical selves. One pair in Group Two, who began enthusiastically to share memories of an old 1960s comedy sketch, quickly let the exchange peter out ('farce really', 'just a bit of fun'), apparently self-conscious that they should be thought so unsophisticated. Another lady in Group Three in recalling her first encounter with *The Muppet Show* (in 1976) was incredulous that as an '*older* teenager' she should have found it so entertaining. What often seems to be at work here is a tension between memories of the innocent pleasure of watching along with everyone else, also a reflexive discomfort at having ever been so unsophisticated a member of the mass audience. As I shall discuss, this can indicate wider tensions between the personal and the collective and can carry implications for how to understand the term 'vintage' in such contexts.

Pleasurable engagement with light entertainment may be understood in part as affective, perhaps attributable to both the actual and virtual forms of *shared* participation engendered by its sociable address. Of course, these are not qualities that generally enhance the artistic status of its programming or the cultural value it is afforded, and the ambivalence with which television was recalled may also reflect the pejorative reputation of the medium as a time-wasting distraction. Many participants associated critical awareness with maturity – indeed, there was much merriment about viewing in the period as belonging to an 'age of innocence', belying the extent to which tastes may also be shaped by increasing awareness of class 'distinction', as defined in Bourdieu's sociology of taste. It may in fact be anxiety about how taste 'classifies the classifier' which divides viewers from the 'naïve gaze' of their youth.[33] In either event, it seems to help those remembering to conceive of past pleasures as being 'of their time', or, to reintroduce a crucial analogy, as pertaining to a certain vintage. It is commonplace to use the term 'vintage' for cars, clothes, and collectables, but I shall now consider how it may bridge the differences between such material objects and particular forms of both entertainment and memory.

3 Materiality and vintage memorabilia

Although television sets were available for purchase from the late 1930s onwards the high cost meant it was another twenty or so years before most working and lower middle class families were able to afford one. Indeed, Princess Margaret's wedding in 1960 was more commonly given as a reason for acquisition than the oft-cited Coronation of 1953, even if the good offices of neighbours meant that many would have had opportunities to view before that:

> [i]n fact we didn't have a television of our own at all until late '50s when we had electricity brought to the farm … before then we had no television at all. So, yes I well remember the first television […] The second one was a bigger one, and the old fellow brought an oil drum in, from the yard, and put it in the corner of the room and the television was plonked on top of the oil drum…! (M, Group Two)

There were a number of comparable memories, some recalling the precise moment of television's arrival, but many more able to describe the look of their first wood or Bakelite-cased set. As Bourdon & Kligler-Vilenchik note, 'wallpaper memories' of television routines 'show many commonalities' across different cultures and nations.[34] Although the RT sessions set out to prompt memories of programmes rather than domestic life in general, reminiscences did constantly flow between television programmes, pleasures, routines, and equipment – a tendency that points to strong links between wallpaper memories and material culture, perhaps also suggesting a difficulty in making sense of television entertainment as an abstract distraction when it had always seemed to be 'the box' as artefact that was the totemic locus of family routines and, sometimes, conflict:

> I still remember watching a *Play for Today*, and seeing my father's finger… [*gestures, others laugh*] going towards the off button. […] (F, Group Three)

Many recalled strict rules over who was allowed to touch, tune, and control the equipment, and governing how they were allowed to view it:

> Female: We had a box television, and my father actually measured – he truly did measure – the distance, because he'd got a booklet about things, and what was written in the booklet in those days was absolutely gospel. And it was something like 7 foot, 6 inches [that] we had to be back from the television. He

> actually measured where we sat as a family… round in a semi-circle at this distance …
> Male: … [because] it was bad for your eyes …
>
> Female: … of course it was. Because of the rays, the rays were dangerous! […] We had to have the lamp in a certain position, [to] cast the light in the correct way … (Group Two)

The frequent reference to television as a physical presence within the family home needs to be further considered alongside responses to material objects shown during the sessions. Odd bits and pieces such as old television tie-in board games (including *Double Your Money* and *New Faces*), collectable cards from tea packets showing faces of 1960s and 1970s celebrities, published children's annuals linked to popular shows, copies of the *Radio Times* and the *TV Times*, and the young listing magazine *Look-in* were all left on tables for participants to browse while refreshments were served. There had been an expectation that reading these might prompt a specific memory of a show or performer, but the impact was rather more general. Those who picked up items seemed to enjoy simply handling them and noting to one another the habits they evoked, such as the repetitive rereading of annuals and listings over the Christmas holidays. Bearing visible traces of age and usage, they also fixed the viewing experiences with which they were associated in a temporally-discrete fashion.

The remote ephemerality of the broadcast television image has always been at odds with the solid apparatus of its reception and the sense of intimacy and immediacy that its domestic centrality encouraged. Indeed, Anna McCarthy demonstrates how within philosophical discourse it is precisely the medium's challenge to common sense divisions between immateriality and materiality that has also allowed it to serve 'as a kind of rhetorical toy in numerous acts of writing, and representing, the modern'.[35] The mutation of British television services over the last decade into a digital, partially on-demand, service further problematises its ontological status, adding in mobility and choice to the relative fixity of the old broadcaster-to-home-viewer recipe.[36] Television, as all the RT participants were well aware, no longer even has to be viewed from a television receiver. In so far as it does still occupy a privileged place in domestic settings, the set (still continually reinvented as an object of consumer desire)[37] has shifted over time from being a chunky wooden-cased 'window on the world'

(around which the family gathered) to something with 'the spatial characteristics of a painting',[38] hung on the wall as if in an art gallery.

It would seem reasonable then to consider whether the spatial compression of the 'box' in the contemporary home has stoked affection for the reassuring fixities of a cumbersome, obsolete apparatus. Indeed, we might further speculate whether the shifting parameters of electronic communication have lent a new intensity to our relationships with *things* more generally. The burgeoning study of material culture may be insightful in this regard; a good example of this might be Daniel Miller's affecting portraits of individual lives as articulated and read through their relationships with personal possessions and domestic objects. In this ethnographic context 'things' are rescued from the paradox whereby they are dismissed as over-invested commodities of capitalist exchange or ignored as peripheral to a spiritualist, anthropocentric world view, but are instead consistent with and of everyday human activity, relationships, and expression (also inexpression). Perhaps, as Miller suggests, 'possessions often remain profound and usually the closer our relationships are with objects, the closer our relationships are with people'.[39] Similarly, Sherry Turkle's edited collection of essays on personal 'evocative objects' reveals a yearning for the physical that is particularly evident in Susan Yee's disillusionment with a newly-digitised archive of architectural design:

> [t]oday's drawings and models are constructed on the computer. They have never been physical. They are born digital. They will never be touched. […] Will future students be satisfied to simply understand the algorithms that generated their designs? […] Will we be able to feel the human connection through digital archives? Will we care?[40]

For the most part the 'things' of interest to Turkle and Miller are cherished personal possessions, not the stuff of consumer desire, and it is important to recognise that vintage items (including old television sets) are now part of a thriving trade. Can we also conceive of these goods as 'evocative objects' even if they are bought and sold for consideration, even if their provenance is not personal to the buyer?

For the duration of the RT research project I also monitored and observed the exchange of vintage television goods at a selection of auction, market, and retail locations. To put it in financial terms, receivers such as the iconic Bush TV22 will now fetch around £100-£300 in the UK; less stylishly retro or more numerous extant models may sell for considerably less than that, often to be restored by amateur enthusiasts. A higher price is

attached to rarities such as the first colour set, or the Keracolor 'Space Age' models. One of the very few remaining spherical 'Zarach' sets – a futuristic case housing a 14-inch Sony Trinitron colour set (of which only about 100 were made in 1969-70) – was recently available for £1500.[41]

Fig. 3: A well-preserved Bush TV22 for sale on eBay, March 2015. Photograph courtesy of Gary Ashworth.

However, there are innumerable other examples for which the text and subtext of eBay advertisements can be particularly telling; sets are reluctantly turfed out of their loft storage, kept for 40 years or more in non-working order, preserved for reasons as much sentimental as aesthetic. One seller confessed to buying an old set at an auction house 'having been struck by its beauty (and to save it from being turned into a drinks cabinet by another bidder)', even though he had never really had the space and had never even attempted to switch it on.[42] Trade in portable, vintage, television-related goods is equally brisk but often inexpensive, apparently driven more by nostalgia than future profit. Programme memorabilia (from production stills to 1960s *Blue Peter* badges) and old copies of the *TV Times* and *Radio Times* are accessible to the personal collector precisely because they were once commonplace. These objects can be exchanged amongst like-minded traders because they pertain to a shared social his-

tory, which of course is also why the exchange of reminiscences can be so pleasurable, the RT sessions being a case in point.

By way of bringing my various deliberations together, I suggest that the inclination of RT research participants to characterise 'television' in the material form of the remembered object (the set) implies a need to memorialise the experience it provided and to work through the memories of conflict for which the home provided a fixed setting. The affection expressed for old equipment during the research workshops was wholly consistent with the sentiments expressed about programmes, performers, and family viewing rituals. Although none of the participants admitted to having ever bought any television memorabilia they were largely unsurprised that the market in such artefacts should be so buoyant and speculated that it may well be driven by similar sentiments to their own.

It is often observed that one's inner consciousness does not keep pace with one's body, and part of the process of ageing requires an emotional negotiation of the 'distance' travelled. The exchange of memories and artefacts are each ways in which willing parties are able to connect to the lived past, and through such practices they may negotiate a place for their personal experience within collective narratives that are often rather different to the accounts given by broadcasters or historians for praxis of the same 'vintage'. Old shows may therefore function similarly to vintage artefacts in so far as both may become emotionally invested as objects of desire associated with lost ways of life and function within discourse as symbols of shared cultural experience that bear traces of age, rather than being represented as footage for contemporary ridicule in an archive clip show. Indeed, it is precisely the instability of the television text (as an impoverished, socially-anachronistic audiovisual record of the performative experience) that produces the irony whereby television viewing may sometimes be better remembered by *association with* vintage artefacts than in its 'original' moving image form. As Frances Bonner has argued, television spin-off products may be considered as 'technologies of attachment, which speak in the short or the long term, and are capable of revealing not just a person's relationship with television, but also its place within a network of relationships with people and objects, present and past'.[43]

One historical constant is that the pleasure of television, particularly in its light and frivolous forms, is ever at odds with formal ideals of cultural value that pay little heed to the social contexts of viewing. Because the designation of forgotten objects as 'vintage' affords them a certain dignity in public discourse the concept may help viewers to (re)negotiate the differences between their sentimental inner viewer and a more critical,

contemporary, sense of self. So much of the everyday past must inevitably be let go, but some of its undervalued detritus may yet offer a way to re-engage with forgotten routines and the richer family viewing experiences these structured. Whereas such an observation may suggest similar concerns to media archaeology[44] the latter would present a slightly different disciplinary field of reference and risk obviating the more typical text-audience interests of performance, genre, memory, and affect, out of which the RT project developed. Instead, this article has suggested that vintage materiality and memory are appropriate considerations to inform the re-examination of old entertainment programmes, complementing but not displacing the approaches furnished by both formal histories and traditionally text-oriented critique.

References

Baudrillard, J. *The gulf war did not take place*, translated by Paul Patton. Sydney: Power Publications, 1995.

Benjamin, W. *On the concept of history*. New York: Classic Books America, 2009.

Bonner, F. 'My Favourite Things: spin-off products and television memories' in *Remembering television: Histories, technologies, memories*, edited by K. Darian-Smith and S. Turnbull. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012: 173-191.

Bourdieu, P. *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*, translated by Richard Nice. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984.

Bourdon, J. 'Some Sense of Time: Remembering Television', *History & Memory*, Vol. 15, no. 2, Fall/Winter 2003: 5-36.

Bourdon, J. and Kligler-Vilenchik, N. 'Together, nevertheless? Television memories in mainstream Jewish Israel', *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2011: 33-47.

Briggs, A. *The history of broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, vol. 1 to 5. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961-1995.

Cockburn, D. 'Memories, Traces, and the Significance of the Past' in *Time and memory: Issues in philosophy and psychology*, edited by C. Hoerl and T. McCormack. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001: 393-410.

Creeber, G. 'The Joy of Text?: Television and Textual Analysis', *Critical Studies in Television*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2006: 81-88.

Darian-Smith, K. and Turnbull, S (eds). *Remembering television: Histories, technologies, memories*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012.

Dhoest, A. 'Everybody Liked It: Collective Memories of Early Flemish Television Fiction', *Particip@tions*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2006.

Greenberg, D. 'President Bush's false [flashbulb] memory of 9/11/01', *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2004: 363-370.

Herman, E. and Chomsky, N. *Manufacturing consent*. New York: Pantheon, 1988.

Hilmes, M (ed.). *The television history book*. London: BFI, 2003.

Hoskins, A. 'Television and the collapse of Memory', *Time and Society*, 13:1, 2004: 109-127, 121.

Kuhn, A. *An everyday magic: Cinema and cultural memory*. London-New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002.

Lepp, A. and Pantti, M. 'Window to the West: Memories of Watching Finnish Television in Estonia During The Soviet Period', *View: Journal of European Television History and Culture*, Vol.2, No. 3, 2013: 77-87.

McCarthy, A. 'From Screen to Site: Television's Material Culture, and Its Place', *October*, #98, Fall 2001: 93.

Miller, D. *The comfort of things*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008.

Moran, J. *Armchair nation*. London: Profile, 2013.

Morley, D. 'Television: not so much a visual medium, more a visible object' in *Visual culture*, edited by C. Jenks. London: Routledge, 1995: 170-189.

Nichols, B. *Representing reality: Issues and concepts in documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

O'Sullivan, T. 'Television memories and cultures of viewing, 1950-65' in *Popular television in Britain: Studies in cultural history*, edited by J. Corner. London: BFI, 1991: 159-181.

Parikka, J. *What is media archaeology?*. Cambridge-Malden: Polity Press, 2012.

Penati, C. 'Remembering our first TV set – Personal memories as a source for television audience history', *View: Journal of European Television History and Culture*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2013: 4-12.

Rodan, D. 'Large, sleek, slim, stylish flat screens: privatized space and the televisual experience', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2009: 367-382.

Samuel, R. *Theatres of memory* (*volume 1*). London-New York: Verso, 1994: 3-48.

Spigel, L. *Make room for TV: Television and the family ideal in postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Tartt, D. *The Goldfinch*. London: Abacus, 2014.

Turnbull, S. 'A Gap in the Records: Television Audiences and the History of "Us"' in *Remembering television: Histories, technologies, memories*, edited by K. Darian-Smith and S. Turnbull. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012: 17-29.

van Dijck, J. 'Mediated Memories: Personal Cultural Memory as Object of Cultural Analysis', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2004: 261-277.

Wheatley, H. 'Beautiful images in spectacular clarity: spectacular television, landscape programming and the question of (tele)visual pleasure', *Screen*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2011: 233-248.

Yee, S. 'The Archive' in *Evocative objects: Things we think with*, edited by Sherry Turkle. Cambridge-London: MIT Press, 2007: 32-36.

About the author

Dr Helen Piper is Senior Lecturer in Television Studies in the Department of Film & Television at the University of Bristol. She has just completed the study 'Remembering Television', another outcome of which was a recent exhibition in Bristol. Piper has published a number of articles on popular television, some of which also address the transformed experience of collective viewing.

Notes

1. Tartt 2014, p. 31.
2. Bourdon & Kligler-Vilenchik 2011, p. 35.
3. O'Sullivan 1991, p. 178.
4. The study took place from 2008-11 and is reflected upon in a number of publications by those involved. See Darian-Smith & Turnbull 2012.
5. See for example Bourdon 2003 and Bourdon & Kligler-Vilenchik 2011.
6. The coinage is from Samuel 1994.
7. van Dijck 2004, p. 269.
8. Ibid., p. 263.
9. See for example 'the propaganda model' of news production developed by Herman & Chomsky 1988.
10. Hoskins 2004, p. 121.
11. Baudrillard 1995, p. 31.
12. Bourdon & Kligler-Vilenchik 2011, p. 34.
13. An opposition first developed by Nichols 1991.
14. Creeber 2006, p. 84.
15. Ibid., p. 82.
16. Penati 2013, p. 9.
17. Darian-Smith & Turnbull 2012, p. 7. The authors cite Alan McKee's earlier observations about the Australian National Film and Sound Archive.
18. The online BBC Archive currently offers nine 'collections' in the subject category of 'Broadcasting and Performing Arts', four of which relate explicitly to television. See bbc.co.uk/archive/collections.shtml (accessed on 24 March 15).
19. Aaronovitch is referring to the contemporary scandal about the late television presenter Jimmy Savile's history of sexual abuse, unearthed only after his death.
20. See Benjamin 2009. The position he advocates as the vantage point of a historical materialism is one that does not simply survey the victories of the past and its geniuses but also acknowledges 'the nameless drudgery of its contemporaries' (p. 8).
21. Cockburn 2001, p 396.
22. In 1960 there were just two channels in the UK (BBC and ITV), and by 1985 there were four (BBC1, BBC2, ITV, Channel 4).
23. Moran 2013, p. 6.
24. These were in the form of 'screengrab' images rather than moving image clips to avoid the risk of effacing the original memory with the new experience of re-viewing (that would be necessary for re-enactment).
25. Three sessions were held in 2014 in the Avon valley region (Bristol to Bath) involving some 40 to 50 participants. Responses will be documented in more detail elsewhere, including an interactive public exhibition in Bristol in November 2015, at which further contributions to the project will be invited.
26. See for example Greenberg 2004.
27. Although some class/ethnic identity differences became apparent during exchanges between participants, this data was not used as criteria for recruitment as it was considered preferable to maintain and tap into existing friendship/social groups.
28. Turnbull 2012, p. 28.
29. There are omissions. For example, none were held during the Second World War. The

event has been held in a variety of locations, always with a senior member of the Royal family in attendance.

30. The Beatles headlined *The Royal Variety Performance* in 1963.
31. For one lady in Group One her late husband's control over their viewing demonstrated his wider domination of their home life.
32. For most of its 41-year history the show was broadcasted on BBC1, Thursdays, approximately 7.30pm.
33. Bourdieu 1984, p. 4.
34. Bourdon & Kligler-Vilenchik 2011, p. 38.
35. McCarthy 2001, p. 93.
36. Television scholarship has intermittently attended to the social significance of the television set as a material object. See for example Spigel 1992 and Morley 1995.
37. British readers may be reminded of the scrambles for flat-screens during the 2011 English riots and 2014 'Black Friday' sales. For an analysis of how contemporary sets have been marketed see Rodan 2009.
38. Wheatley 2011, p. 235.
39. Miller 2008, p. 1.
40. Yee 2007, p. 35.
41. http://www.tvhistory.tv/1960-69-UK.htm (accessed 1 December 2014).
42. Auction on eBay.co.uk of 'Vintage television, TV, Radio Rental model 430, Circa 1957, stage, bakelite', ended 11 Jan 2015.
43. Bonner 2012, p. 174.
44. For an overview of this field see Parikka 2012.