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Fading Echoes: Remembering and Forgetting through Videotapes

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This video essay explores the poignant paradox of videotapes as both preservers (and accelerators) of personal memory (loss). Emphasizing the palimpsestic nature of deteriorating videotapes, this video essay delves into the medium's inherent fragility, reflecting the vulnerability of memories recorded.

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Creator's statement

In the late 20th century, the advent of consumer video technology transformed how we captured and preserved personal memories. We turned to videotapes, longing to cement personal and family moments into enduring, playable memories that promised to stabilize our temporal existence. Weddings, graduations, holidays—we recorded these moments onto magnetic tape in the hope of saving them from the oblivion that surrounds human experience.

As Ina Blom argues, video is a 'machine whose ability to contract and distribute temporal materials in an unfolding present resembles (in a rudimentary way) the working of human memory' (2016: 15–16). Video technology allows us to capture and replay temporal experiences, functioning in a basic way like human memory. Yet in repeatedly playing back videotapes to revisit those memories we accelerate the deterioration of what we seek to permanently preserve—a *tragic irony* unfolds. This irony is central to my video essay, which explores home movies of my own family, shot in the 1990s and 2000s. These tapes, now degrading, offer a deeply personal window into memory preservation and loss. Indeed, the aesthetic features of these videos—the lower resolution, the distinctive colour palette, and even the visual artifacts of wear—have become integral to the memories themselves.

Of all audiovisual formats, videotape conveys perhaps the most acutely palimpsestic quality, accruing poetic significance even as it rapidly deteriorates. For Yvonne Spielmann (2008), video has a reflexive quality insofar as it allows for constant reflection on its own materiality and its process of production and reception. In a way, video makes visible its own technological operations. The videotape image frequently materializes its own precariousness through visible distortion and decay, especially when kept in poor conditions. The hydrolysis of videotape's polyester urethane binder

(Wheeler 2002: 6) testifies to the medium's fragility. Video footage bears visible (and audible) evidence of its own erasure-in-progress.

This deterioration of images and sounds, a by-product of the quickening magnetic erosion, reflects deeper themes of ephemerality. Following Vivian Sobchack's (1992) idea of identification with images, Laura Marks argues that 'identification is a bodily relationship with the screen; thus when we witness a disappearing image we may respond with a sense of our own disappearance' (1997: 95). The fading footage of familiar faces and places provides immediate, affectively-resonant reminders about the vulnerability of memory's infrastructure. The snowy dissolve of once comforting sights echoes our own distorting recollections, identities fading away in every playback. This double loss—of both tape and memory's reliability—imbues videotape with such affective weight. Its failures concurrently expose human dependence on material traces and death's erasure.

As James M. Moran reminds us, 'Videotape's low cost, extended recording time, and capacity to be recycled substantially increase[d] the potential range and volume of events and behaviors recorded during home mode production' (2002: 41). Another irony emerges here. While physically fragile, videotape was versatile. Record, replay, re-record, capture longer moments, understand the context surrounding those lives. This has allowed us to re-witness, for instance, conflicting moments of nuclear family dynamics, in our own families, unlike home movies. Michelle Citron remembers that 'In my family, home movies were powerful and necessary fictions that allowed us to see and explore truths that could only be looked [at] obliquely' (1999: 6). Home movies shot on small gauge film formats, as Citron examines, tended to be more selective. On the contrary, video remembers in a more chaotic way.

Videotape seems contradictory. A once cutting-edge technology that fell into obsolescence. A memory device that deteriorates and disintegrates. Nothing is permanent. These contradictions, obviously, only emerge over time. Indeed, it seems that, on the other hand, videotapes symbolize the (life) trajectory of the people who have engaged with them for years, those who have familiarized themselves with the format and made it part of their lives. The palimpsestic videotape constitutes not just an examination of vulnerable storage media, but perhaps also of the impermanence of identity and being itself.

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Biography

Vladimir Rosas-Salazar is a Lecturer in Latin American Studies at Queen Mary, University of London. He received his PhD in Film and Television Studies from the University of Warwick, United Kingdom, and his MA in Film and Screen Studies from Goldsmiths, University of London.

Review by Diego Cavallotti, Università degli Studi di Cagliari

The video essay and the accompanying commentary are well constructed and refer to the main publications concerning the preservation of magnetic tape. In particular, the statement clarifies the position of the author, who tries to elaborate both scientifically and poetically on the topic of magnetic tape—both analog video and digital video are taken into consideration.

The video essay, on the other hand, proceeds by accumulation of fragments, referring to a sense of disorientation that is inherent in the tragic dimension of the video: a technology to which we entrust our memory, which however proves to be perishable over time. In doing so, the author plays with the different textures of the videos and with the error messages related to the malfunction of the tapes and magnetic heads, thus focusing on what prevents the mediated memory from performing its functions.

In other words, this seems to be the main topic addressed by the video essay: how mediated memory must confront the materiality of the technologies to which it refers and how these technologies cause distortions—inevitable distortions—on the

way memory is constructed. From this point of view, especially because it manages to calibrate the theoretical dimension with archival research, the video essay appears well constructed and publishable.

Review by Melissa Dollman, **Deserted Films**

With his video essay, "Fading Echoes: Remembering and Forgetting through Videotapes," Vladimir Rosas-Salazar has recreated for the viewer the experience of fast-forwarding through an array of footage shot with a VHS camcorder during the 1990s and early 2000s, as the medium neared the end of its popularity with consumers. For his compilation, the author whittled down a collection of several digitized tapes (two generations removed from the originals and up-ressed to high definition) to a handful of emblematic moments, thereby creating a work out of materials the original videographer(s) may or may not have intended for public consumption. Due to the time constraints of the video essay format, Rosas-Salazar had to be selective. He chose these memories, out of "dozens of videotapes digitized in 2020 … recorded in Chile" for review.

After one watches a number of home movies (shot on any medium, in any language), patterns and topics emerge: kids play, people go to the beach and host parties, couples marry, families honor loved ones at their graves, and adventurers drive around in cars. Videographers can, with enough 120-minute videocassettes on hand, keep recording, largely unconstrained, much of the "action" before and after the blowing out of birthday candles, a newly married couple's first dance, or catching that huge fish. They can capture the entire birthday party, wedding reception, or beach day. Generally, the rise of home video increased "opportunities for representing a great range of social intentions," and for leaving images of the messiness of domestic life and adventures intact (Moran 2002: 43.) Amateur filmmakers who turn to small gauge film formats such as 8 mm and Super 8 mm, or photographers shooting stills with 35 mm film cameras, are routinely pressured to make economic choices (e.g., one would need about 34 reels of 8mm film footage to equal one VHS tape played back at a normal speed—and they then need to be processed by a film lab), or even ideologically ones (e.g., which moments will the family, and by extension society, want to remember and who decides?). Viewing video footage can be almost instantaneous, and after the initial investment of buying the camcorder and tapes, which can be reused, shooting home videos seems freer and, as Rosas-Salazar writes, more chaotic, by comparison.

Rosas-Salazar ruminates on the slow erasure of memories, technological intervention, and what to do with all of these darn deteriorating videotapes, by turning to film and screen studies theorists and archivist-scholars to deal with what he calls

a "double loss." His "Fading Echoes" replicates to great effect the experiential act of using analog technologies, as he also reflects upon his own creative process. To that end, he leaves in many of the sights and sounds of viewing a VHS videotape: the whir of a VCR coming to life upon insertion of a tape, the buzzing of a distorted soundtrack, the on-screen timestamps documenting the dates and often hours of creation, the white flickering tracking lines and horizontal blurry interlacing lines at the bottom of the screen. Stock footage used as the opening graphics reproduces what one would see while popping in a tape. The author also smartly employs a white block font typical of that used in VCR graphics for his additional on-screen text, and utilizes a VCR's own on-screen messages that signal a tape, or the machine itself, is showing signs of physical deterioration and potential loss. Moreover, the machine-generated text changes from "STOP" to "PLAY," "CH03" quickly flashes, a time code counter roll at 00:00:00, the terrestrial television is set to channel 3, and the bottom left acronym reads "SLP" or "Super Long Play" meaning the access copy inserted may include up to six hours of footage (so a dub of up to three 120-minute tapes), but with the lowest quality reproduction compared to the originals. All of these details point to human intervention and a need to review, overwrite, and extend as along as possible the memories contained therein.

Work Cited

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