VHS 2.0:
AMATEUR ARCHIVING ON THE INTERNET AND THE NOSTALGIC
RECLAMATION OF RETRO MEDIA

by

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Abstract

The archiving of retro media on the internet has become one of the more prolific examples of amateur archiving in recent years. Using various case studies, I argue for a new understanding of how this orphaned and obsolete media preserves important nostalgic and cultural histories. Not only this, but the preservation of niche film and television programming deserves recognition for the intricate and complex work of amateur archivists, in the aims of validating their work and viewing the sharing of this material as more than simple file sharing. Often providing the only means by which to access material, these archival sites preserve history through its media output, and I provide a glimpse into the motivations and machinations of their inner workings. In need of protection from legal prosecution, and lacking a clear understanding of their place amongst contemporary media in the mainstream, I argue for a nostalgic reclamation of this material, that can co-exist alongside other media with little to no harm.
Preface

The original research for this study, including all correspondence with individuals and the study of website communities, has been approved by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board, certificate H11-02519.
# Table of Contents

Abstract................................................................................................................................. ii  
Preface..................................................................................................................................... iii  
Table of Contents .................................................................................................................... iv  
List of Tables .......................................................................................................................... v  
List of Figures ......................................................................................................................... vi  
Introduction ............................................................................................................................. 1  
Pirates! ..................................................................................................................................... 14  
  Port of Nostalgia ....................................................................................................................... 19  
  The Tonight Show ................................................................................................................... 23  
  Star Wars ................................................................................................................................ 27  
  Saturday Night Live ............................................................................................................... 31  
  “The Television Version” ....................................................................................................... 36  
Port of Paracinema ................................................................................................................... 45  
  Netflix and Online Media Sources ......................................................................................... 48  
  Alternate Versions ................................................................................................................ 54  
  The A.I.P. Project .................................................................................................................. 59  
Almost Live! .......................................................................................................................... 64  
Doctor Who and The Canadian Cat Puppet .............................................................................. 74  
Temporal Affective Disorder .................................................................................................... 84  
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 95  
Works Cited ............................................................................................................................ 99
List of Tables

Table 1: Tonight Show episodes ................................................................. 25
Table 2: TV Version dialogue ........................................................................ 37
Table 3: Pricing of VHS AIP Films ............................................................... 62
Table 4: Almost Live format .......................................................................... 67
Table 5: Identification of Almost Live episodes ............................................. 69
Table 6: retrovancouer Statistics .................................................................... 87
Table 7: Nostalgia Site Survey ....................................................................... 91
List of Figures

Figure 1: The SNL Archives ........................................................................................................ 33
Introduction

“Not only has there never before been a society so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its immediate past, but there has never before been a society that is able to access the immediate past so easily and so copiously.”(Reynolds xxi)

The internet and the proliferation of online file sharing has completely changed the way people consume and view media. Some may consider it to be no more than a breeding ground for common theft, and equate downloading through unauthorized channels with stealing items from a store. Others see it as a reaction against an increasingly corporatized and restrictive means of distribution, one that seems to be eroding all notions of physical ownership via streaming services that merely “loan” media to consumers. Tucked away inside the online community, hidden amongst a much larger group of file sharers, is a segment of shared media that seems both immune to the legal issues plaguing file sharing, while at the same time being trapped by it. I am referring to the miscellaneous debris of television such as commercials and news broadcasts, and the forgotten films (and forgotten versions of films) that have disappeared from the public sphere and been all but disowned by the owners. Trapped by issues involving clearance rights from individuals who can no longer be found, production companies that have since been dissolved, and audience demographics that number in the mere hundreds, there is no official release in print and none in the works. Mostly forgotten and written off as having served their purpose in a past time, this media is being given a new life through amateur preservationists using the internet as a virtual archive, one that has a seemingly endless storage capacity. This media flies too low under
the radar of authorities to attract legal attention, but is forced to share much of the same virtual space occupied by high-profile piracy, resulting in a community that protects itself through anonymity and closed borders, but in the process limiting the exposure of the preserved media to only a select few.

The term *orphan film* and the broader term *orphan works* have been used to describe works that lack a clear copyright holder “or the commercial potential to pay for their continued preservation” (Melville and Simmon). In 2006, the United States House of Representatives tabled a bill known as the “Orphan Works Act of 2006”, designed in-part as counter-measure to what some considered “an increasing ‘expansion’ of copyright, most visibly embodied in term extension” (Schwartz and Williams 141), that sought to reduce the liability and potential prosecution of individuals who had demonstrated due diligence before utilizing orphaned works. It was not passed, nor was a 2008 version of the bill, and to date there has been no legislation passed that provides protection for individuals who wish to use works that fall under the category of orphan works (film, television, or otherwise). It should be no surprise that a grass roots (as ill-fitting as that term may be for an internet-based collective) movement has seen fit to preserve this material regardless of the risks (perhaps, as a direct defiance), using the anonymity of the internet and its seemingly endless storage space (via the BitTorrent protocol) to store the works on several dedicated sites, creating virtual archives in the process.

Bound up in these amateur archives is a strong sense of nostalgic attachment, and a longing to return to a past time and place. Evidenced through first-hand testimonials from those involved in these preservation efforts, and research by others on re-watching
habits of viewers, it appears these preservationists are fuelled by a desire to reconnect with the past, which the preserved media allows via an identification process with an individual’s own nostalgic memories. Whether it is via television commercials from one’s childhood, media format-specific versions of films, or forgotten films that represent a particular era of media consumption that has disappeared, reliving and re-watching this content connects viewers with a clearly-defined past and allows for an escape from the current cultural landscape. It is often difficult to see the forest from the trees, and these amateur archivists provide the means and opportunity to re-align oneself with his or her own past and reclaim a former cultural identity, often in the absence of a current one.

Speaking on his own reclamation of a prior, more radical form of queer activism through the watching of nostalgic AIDS documentaries, Lucas Hilderbrandt comments “I know very well that I cannot experience these past moments, but all the same I want to believe in the possibility of living vicariously through the video” (308). Hilderbrandt’s comments are contextualized within a journal article that focuses on the role that nostalgic or retro media has on the re-activating of past activism (or reactivism), reclaimed by a collective that is “driven to preserve this footage before it fades from participants’ memories or from the videotapes themselves” (308). He posits that “Cultural memory conveys a sense of shared experience that is not reducible to dates and places but rather history that is felt” (306), something that helps to explain the strong nostalgic connection individuals have with this material even when it does not directly correlate with lived experiences.

In her book *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning*, Janelle L. Wilson studied the American fascination with the 1950s, and discovered that a majority of Generation-X respondents would, given the choice to travel in time to any period, choose to revisit the
1950s. She suggests that a generation’s nostalgia for a past they never personally experienced is an attempt to create or rectify a “lacking generational or collective identity” (65). I would add that the current identity need not be lacking or missing altogether, but rather individuals take pleasure in reclaiming a part of their own history, even more so if they feel it is in threat of being lost or forgotten (whether by the public, or themselves). In the context of my study, the term “nostalgia” will refer to an attachment to past history and its media output within one’s own lifespan, and the chance to re-witness “the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history” (Boym 8).

Just as cult cinema has the power to “submerge audiences into a ‘past world’” (Mathijs and Mendik 3), so too does the material I will be discussing, all of which can also be considered cult material with respective cult followings. The VCR (and its offspring) along with the ability to record off-air broadcasts with ease has afforded recent generations an unprecedented ability to access the past through powerfully vivid media artifacts, and the evolution of a Web 2.0 internet has increased the ease by which these artifacts can be shared and accessed, no longer keeping this material in the domain of fan niches. The individuals sharing this material fall somewhere between the corporate media conglomerates, who seek to control and profit from media, and the fans who produce their own fanfic works and re-edit vintage material to create Frankensteinian original material. However, much like the fans who re-appropriate material for their own use, the individuals of my focus are very much looking to share their material with as many as possible. As Robert V. Kozinets summarizes while discussing the re-appropriation of material by fans in contrast to corporate producers, “(fans) run on egoboo, and this means
that the more people they distribute their work to, the bigger the egoboo. Egoboo means sharing is good. Profit motive means sharing is not so good” (207).

By and large, the reclamation of a past memories through old television footage is a phenomenon shared by a very specific age demographic; those who grew up in the 80s and 90s (with the late 70s in a smaller amount). Arguably, this could extend to the current generation of teenagers, as it is my hypothesis that the correlation has more to do with the proliferation of the VCR (and later the PVR) than the decades themselves. As the majority of content available comes from the mid-eighties onwards, it can be reasonably deduced that the increase in VCR usage (thus preserving content) has allowed for this nostalgia to thrive. Looking back to a time when one was progressing through his or her own childhood, the reconnection through this media conjures up memories of a time when the world was full of opportunities, with childhood innocence coloring the view of the world. As historian David Lownethal has remarked, “What pleases the nostalgist is not just the relic but his own recognition of it, not so much the past itself as its supposed aspirations, less the memory of what actually was than of what was once thought possible” (9).

Two things are of most interest to this study. First, how the internet works as a means to access and distribute material, and how it functions to allow fans to work collaboratively (often at great distance) to archive film and television. And second, the connection that nostalgia has towards the preservation of material that has otherwise no perceived value. The former is perhaps the most important change in the way fans access and share personal archives, as it has allowed the casual fan the chance to access a world of fanaticism that was once relegated to a small underground circle of only the most
diehard fans. Will Straw, in his essay “Embedded Memories”, proposes two ways in which the internet provides the perfect environment for this material to prosper and find its respective niche audience. It manages to bind “together otherwise isolated interests,” thereby reconstituting “viable markets from market fragments”, while it also “provides the terrain on which sentimental attachments, vernacular knowledges, and a multitude of other relationships to the material culture of the past are magnified and given coherence” (3). The once rare and much sought after *Star Wars Holiday Special* (Steve Binder, 1978), aired only once and panned by even its creators, has now become as easy to find on the internet as the latest Hollywood film or television program, further integrating it into popular culture and providing access for even the most casual of Star Wars fans.

In fact, a few things have changed, which have had a cause-and-effect role on how this material is valued. For one, online retailers and auction houses, such as Amazon and eBay have completely changed how the value of films are assessed. Found for a single dollar in large bins during most video stores’ mass exodus of VHS tapes in the early 2000s, the far-reaching and low-overhead model of the online marketplace has found the same VHS tapes in the hands of those who see them as rare and collectible, sometimes charging upwards of $100 for a single used (and in questionable condition) VHS copy. As perhaps a reactionary stance to the price gouging of these sellers, others have taken it upon themselves to digitize these films and preserve them online, sharing them for free with others (in one case including them in an incredibly complex and organized online archive that would rival most university film archives in its organization and thoroughness).
In Simon Reynolds’ book Retromania, from which the introductory quote has been taken, archival elitism cloud an argument that looks at this media debris (primarily television commercials) as something to be discarded, at least in its initial, unaltered form. Even though preserving everything is physically, as well as logistically impossible, applying such selection criteria ensures far more is excluded than is included. Storage space is limited in archival institutions, and care must be given to ensure the environment is favourable for long-term storage of sensitive media formats. All of this means that the material preserved in traditional archives can not encompass everything that is culturally important, but rather the material that is the most culturally important. Retromania takes this idea, that it is only the most important cultural artifacts that should be preserved, and applies the rationale to virtual spaces that fill the internet and other areas of our increasingly digital society. Reynolds goes so far as to write two similar, yet useful in their contradictory nature, statements. First, reflecting on the idea that without selection criteria, archives will de-evolve into anarchives, Reynolds makes the rather presumptuous claim that “History must have a dustbin, or History will be a dustbin, a gigantic, sprawling garbage heap” (27). One page later, he writes that “History is a form of editing reality; for a historical account to work it requires a filter, otherwise the sheer sludge of information silts up the narrative flow” (28). Although these two claims may seem to supplement each other nicely, they actually reinforce a re-imagining of a past with all “garbage” conveniently removed from memory, with the acceptance that history can not be preserved without altering itself through omissions, thereby “tidying up” the past. It also makes one ponder what the purpose of archives are, if they can only contain
that which individuals see fit to include, which in turn means a few individuals have the power to reshape everyone’s access to the past.

Reynolds refers to the anarchive as “a barely navigable disorder of data-debris and memory-trash”, which he says can be seen above all on the internet (27). This is truly a case of judging a book by its cover, as amongst the randomly strewn about chunks of old television and personal video blogs on sites such as YouTube are also highly detailed and organized uploads, often specialized (or catalogued) by decade and country. Add to this the fact that the retro content found on YouTube is often culled from old VHS television tapings from personal collections (meaning the uploader sees it as anything but trash), and Reynolds’ cursory presumptive claim deserves a more thorough investigation.

What is actually happening here is that individuals are sharing old material that they have assigned value, whether for themselves or through a faint inkling that someone else will find it useful. This is not a circumstance of people scouring their old VHS tapes and uploading as much junk as is physically possible. As Will Straw makes perfectly clear, “A significant effect of the internet…is precisely this reinvigoration of early forms of material culture”, and it is through the viral nature of embedding and sharing YouTube videos that this material reclaims its place in the lives of viewers, in the process rendering “the already familiar all the more coherent and solid” (4).

To varying extents, cultural taste is always involved in the archiving process, especially when the material being archived is media. For example, the many films that have come and gone over the years with little impact on the mainstream (direct-to-video releases of the 80s, box-office flops that saw VHS as their final format) struggle to find a presence in archives, due to the lack of either cultural significance or archival relevance.
And who can blame an archive, with shrinking shelf space and limited resources, for turning down forgettable films in place of a newly-found collection of early cinema. But as our environment has become increasingly saturated with media, so has its connection with our social reality and the way it shapes our experienced memories. Nostalgia can now be traced as much to a place or person, as it can to a commercial jingle or television program, and can invoke just as strong of a sense of recall. Because of this, I would argue that we need to preserve more from the past few decades than just the films and television programs that were fortunate enough to gain public and/or critical attention, simply because of the unperceived (perhaps subconscious) connection that all media has had with our own lives. But this poses a problem if the concept of an anarchive is to be given credence.

For one, my experience of a particular cultural climate will be vastly different from someone else, even if they live a life almost identical to mine. I may value a particular band’s album, whereas someone else might see it as garbage, and the nostalgic attachments I form throughout my life will be deeply personal. Because of this, the curator of an archive may see fit to include things that have a personal attachment or connection for themselves (thinking it would carry forward to society as a whole), but neglect to include other things that may belong to a shared cultural memory for a large, but niche, group of individuals. It may be that, no matter how meticulous and well-intentioned an archive may be, the requirement to select certain “important” things to be preserved does nothing but reinforce an already ingrained cultural selection process, with items already valued (and therefore likely well documented before their inclusion in an
archive) making the cut at the expense of lesser known (and perhaps lesser-valued, for whatever reasons) items being left to survive on their own in the wild.

Take the explosion of direct-to-video films in the 1980s, as an example. Capitalizing on a new business model of the video store that created increasing demand for new product to fill shelves, hundreds (if not thousands) of films were released directly to the VHS format with the goal of making a quick profit. One would be hard pressed to find even one of these films that have made the inclusion to any respected film archive in an academic setting. Instead, they have received the majority of their archival integrity through genre fans (horror, especially), their “so bad it’s good” reputations, and the often lavish and artistically impressive cover art. The unfortunate truth is that these films are considered by many to be the trash of cinema, and would therefore be (if we follow Reynolds’ reasoning) the first to be cut from a selection of films to be preserved in a scholarly archive. Not only are they housed on obsolete media (VHS) for an obsolete market (the video store shelf), but the films themselves, created on the cheap specifically for the VHS market, have become obsolete by extension. What the internet allows for, through the various sites dedicated to these types of films, is the creation of “spaces that magnify the significance of such (films), making even the most trivial objects the focus of a popular but highly ordered knowledge” (Straw 4). Sometimes the simple act of obtaining a film or television program in any form is a near impossible task. If a film is lesser known, and saw its last release on VHS in a limited run, it is likely that the only means to view it would come from a used copy (finding one which may be a test of patience, if used copies are not plentiful) or through fan trading circles. Before the proliferation of the internet, fans were required to trade VHS tapes in person or through
the mail, making the process (and quality) less than ideal. Now, material can now be made available with incredible ease, and without any loss of quality through tape-dubs. In addition, using the internet to disseminate media means that one fan can reach hundreds, if not thousands, of fans in the time it would normally have taken to send material to one person.

Like most people, my interest in retro media is connected to my own sense of nostalgia intertwined with various television programs, films, and commercials, and my own efforts to collect and preserve material has its own inclusionary and exclusionary criteria. In my case, I collect anything aired on television (commercials or television programming not commercially available) from the mid-80s until the late 90s, which correlates directly to my own childhood and teenage years. In addition, I exclude anything aired outside of Canada and the US. While this may seem like I am rejecting “trash” that I don’t see worth preserving, I am merely a small part of a much larger collective, each of whom have their own criteria (and limited resources, hence the exclusionary requirements). Combined with other amateur archivists, both within Canada and worldwide, our individual collections combine to create a master archive, which now has the ability to be shared using the Internet as its storage facility. The internet has given amateur archivists the chance to fill in the gaps found in traditional archives, creating a fascinating division of labour amongst the archiving community (not to mention the sheer amount of free labour that is being utilized to do something that is, at its core, remunerative work).

For those who know what they are looking for, and are fortunate enough to know where to look, there are also private torrent file-sharing sites that specialize in specific
content and carry stringent exclusionary criteria. Because of the thin line that amateur archiving treads upon in respect to copyright infringement, there is a sense of protective anonymity that most users apply to these sites. Because of this, I will not be referring to these sites by their actual names, but will instead use an alias based on the type of content they feature. Even though the sites can be found with a simple Google search, the fact that I will be discussing the inner workings and content found within, something that can not be seen without being a member of the site, means that it is necessary to preserve their anonymity. This is the great difficulty that researchers of this material currently face, as the study of these sites and the material within puts both the researcher and subjects at risk for prosecution, and poses a difficult task for those looking to legitimize research. I had difficulty obtaining clearance from my University’s ethics board, as the very nature of study-by-inclusion meant that I would only be able to see the inner-workings if I was a part of it as well, opening up the liability for the University to the same risks as online file sharers. Despite the incredibly slim possibility of legal troubles because of this research, the mere possibility of prosecution is enough to stop the research before it even begins. This fear of sharing content with others has the unfortunate effect of forcing research to be devalued, requiring much of it to remain anonymous and mostly nameless. To compensate, I have chosen to rely heavily on case studies, in order to demonstrate the full importance of the work done by amateur archivists, in light of the often limited depth that I can provide in order to protect the anonymity of those I am studying.

While my focus is primarily on nostalgic connections to amateur archiving, I will also focus on the importance these archives have on the cinematic community as a whole.
A study by Iain Robert Smith on bootleg archives on the internet, which argues for a similar understanding of the importance of amateur archives, highlights how fan-made subtitles for films that have never been officially translated can open up new understandings of how world cinema functions. He remarks that “one of the strengths of these online communities is that they function to widen access to areas of world cinema that do not tend to leave the domestic market” (par. 5). Considering one of my own case studies features a site which produces a number of fan-made subtitles, Smith’s study serves as a companion piece to my own, serving as an example of the kind of contemporary research being done on amateur archiving on the internet, an area of research that is just beginning to be studied by individuals with access to the communities themselves. By drawing comparisons to the “grey market” of bootlegs, Smith’s study highlights how the sharing of media treads a complicated line between hurting legitimate releases while at the same time obliterating the grey market sale of material that can now be found online for free.
Pirates!

“The name of the game in the entertainment business is short-term profit.”

-Norman Lear (qtd. in Weinraub)

A lot like a modern-day gold rush, with the difference being that the discovered gold is shared with the world when found, rather than kept personally, “video archaeologists” share the same internet space occupied by the same individuals who upload pirated copies of the latest Hollywood films and other high-visibility piracy, making the continued existence of online amateur archives tenuous at best. Add to this the reality that, technically speaking, all amateur archiving that shares material on the internet is a form of piracy in the eyes of the law, and it is due time that we understand the importance of the work that is being done by these archives, rather than blanket them by association with the legitimately harmful piracy that continues to be fought against.

On January 19th, 2012, something truly destructive happened to the amateur archiving community. An online file storage site, MegaUpload.com, which offered anyone in the world the ability to upload a file and make it available free to other users via a self-generated URL (or in laypersons terms, a website link), was shut down by US officials on charges related to racketeering, copyright infringement and money laundering. While, like most file-hosting sites in every corner of the internet, the site did host material that was pirated content, its large and reliable server space made it one of the biggest and most widely used free file storage sites. This meant that a large number of

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1 A self-appointed term used to describe those who sift through old VHS tapes looking for off-air recordings of television, or other interesting tidbits of media, much like an archaeologist would sift through the layers of stratum.
amateur archives that did not utilize a BitTorrent model of content storage (more on this later) and those that could not afford to run their own servers to store massive amounts of data (of which no amateur archives of the sort exist currently) were reliant upon sites like MegaUpload to store and make available its content.

The site ClassicNickShows.net, which runs a forum containing many hard to find children’s television programs, exclusively makes use of file storage site links (MegaUpload being one of them). This means that, while not a complete loss, all of the links to MegaUpload (henceforth referred to as MU) are now offline and those files are unavailable. Granted, there is the option to re-upload to another file storage site provided users still have the files available, but this comes without a guarantee of a similar fate befalling the next site they store content on. Even the preservation of retro video gaming magazines has suffered the same fate, with the site Retromags.com losing its entire collection of magazines from all over the world in the MU shutdown. Not only is the site dedicated to preserving old magazines, it is also the only place to find digitized copies of the issues, which are scanned meticulously often only by its curator. MU had been the official storage site of Retromags, and therefore the entire collection containing hundreds of hard to find magazines (which often sell for five dollars a piece minimum at online auction) are now offline for an indefinite period of time, forcing the site’s curator and its users to upload all of the issues again elsewhere, or wait to see the fate of their files (which fall under an unclear section of the law). It is currently uncertain as to whether or not legitimately uploaded files will be retrievable, or if they will simply be deleted in a mass-erasure of the MU servers (Tsukayama).
On the US site StopFraud.gov, the image painted of MU is one of a pirate’s haven, stating:

“(MegaUpload) conducted their illegal operation using a business model expressly designed to promote uploading of the most popular copyrighted works for many millions of users to download… (and that)…the site was structured to discourage the vast majority of its users from using Megaupload for long-term or personal storage by automatically deleting content that was not regularly downloaded.” (US Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, par. 8)

Evidenced by the sites I’ve mentioned previously, along with scores of others, it is clear that MU was used by many sites for long-term storage. Perhaps it is the definition of long-term that complicates things, as in a post-torrent Internet things have a limited lifespan, which is expected to be a few years at best.

And perhaps it is the nature of the BitTorrent protocol, foreign to those who do not use the technology on a regular basis. The very nature of using torrents to distribute material implies a scattered point of origin, and a lifespan only as long as the torrent’s popularity. When someone creates a torrent file, they are creating an index of sorts that allows multiple users to grab a file (or files) in tiny pieces, in no particular order. For example, if I wanted to share a video file, I would first create a torrent file, which would consist of all the information needed to replicate that video file. The torrent file would split up the video into multiple pieces, and would use something called a Hash to verify each piece’s integrity when others download them (essentially a numerical code for data
integrity). I would then open my BitTorrent client, load the torrent file I just created, and then send the torrent file off to whomever I wished to share my video with (or I could upload that torrent file to a website, where others could download it). Once someone opens up the torrent file on their end (let’s call them User2), they start downloading each individual piece of the video file from myself until they have a full copy. If after this, a third person opens the torrent file, they will begin to download the video from both myself and User2, grabbing the pieces they need from whomever has them available. In practice, there are often hundreds of users in what is called a “swarm”, grabbing pieces from other individuals while sending the pieces they currently have to others as well. This de-centralized method of downloading files takes the strain off of an individual server, which was previously the dominant method of downloading files. It also means that if no one has their BitTorrent client open and sharing a complete copy of a file, that torrent is effectively dead, and no one will be able to download the complete file. Perhaps convenient and perhaps a detriment, all individuals need to do in order to make a file disappear is remove the torrent from all clients collectively.

The internet is now littered with dead torrents, like store flyers for businesses that no longer exist, linking to empty space with the promise that *something* was once there. Because torrents have become the dominant means of downloading media through unofficial channels, there is some acceptance that a file will not be around forever, as without dedicated individuals making the content available, its popularity will die out and it will eventually be abandoned. Because of this, MU’s model of expiring download links that have been inactive for a certain length of time is no different than the normal experience a torrent user would face on public sites, where very little consideration is
given to longevity. I say “public” sites, because there is a large difference between the content and users of public and private sites, the latter requiring registration and log-in information, and often requiring an invitation from a current user in order to join. It is the public sites that are littered with viruses, recent blockbusters recorded from handheld cameras in theatres, poor quality video and audio, vaguely or mislabelled files and an overall lack of interest in proper taxonomy and organization of content. The focus is often on quantity, rather than quality.

Sites such as The Pirate Bay and Demonoid, despite being vast and often excellent sources of vintage material not available anywhere else, can be cumbersome to navigate though. The Pirate Bay has a limited series of criteria to browse for video content, with Movies, Movies DVDR, Music Videos, Movie Clips, TV shows, Handheld, Highres - Movies, Highres - TV shows, 3D, and Other being the only means to sort through content. Demonoid, on the other hand, takes it a step further by also allowing the user to search by Genre, in addition to similar upper-level categories as TPB has. Regardless, this still leaves the organization of content up to the uploader of the files, as it is the information they include with the upload that determines how easy it will be for someone else to find the content they are looking for. If I were looking for a certain film that goes by alternate titles, the uploader’s inclusion of the director’s name would ensure I could find it, regardless of the film’s title. Were they to simply provide a description with a single title, and no year of release or crew listing, it would be nearly invisible for someone searching for it. Beyond the organization that is hard-coded into the site, it is a somewhat unorganized system, and there is often duplicate content uploaded. It is kept relatively organized by its own users, who have the ability to report duplicate content,
inappropriate content, and otherwise help to keep the site tidy and orderly. For Demonoid, the only restriction is that adult content can not be uploaded; other than that, it is fair game to upload any mix of content, including recent pirated films on the radar of government agencies, alongside fascinating material such as films only available on VHS (and long since out of print).

**Port Of Nostalgia**

The first private site I will look at is, at its core, a media repository. Originally started as a site for comedy and cartoon programming by like-minded fans, joined together through the internet by various means, it has grown to become one of the foremost private torrent sites for rare and obscure retro media. In addition to current programming, the vast majority of content appeals to the unique user base, which according to one of the site moderators is almost entirely people who grew up during the 80s and 90s. Partly due to the fact that the site originally featured material that the site’s creator grew up watching, there is a slant towards uploading material from the same time period, and in a positive feedback loop, the users only reinforce its popularity. There are basic categories designed to segment the material, mostly based upon the channel it originates from (in the case of television programming, such as MTV, Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, and so on), but the majority of material of archival interest falls under the “Other” category. The site is also one of the most unique of all private sites, simply because it is one of the few dedicated to preserving old media that allow entire blocks of television to be uploaded. While other sites may feature broadcasts with commercials
included, keeping them as originally aired, the fact that they have an organization scheme that filters individual shows means that a prime-time block of four different programs can not be kept as a single upload (it would need to be split up into its four respective programs, and filed under those categories). This leads to unique content such as an upload from January 9th, 2012: an entire afternoon of programming from KTVU (an Oakland, California channel) from February 19th, 1990. Featuring *The Super Mario Bros. Super Show* (DIC/Saban 1989), *Chip ‘n Dale Rescue Rangers* (Disney 1989), *Ducktales* (Disney1987), and half of an episode of *Silver Spoons* (Embassy 1982), the block preserves an afternoon of children’s programming exactly as it aired with commercials intact, from an era when afterschool television was a large part of the childhood experience.

Even though stations often record their own programming (referred to as an aircheck), this is often used for billing purposes and to retain a record of what was aired, and is generally kept for only a year before being recorded over (although now most airchecks are recorded digitally). Something like the KTVU block from twenty-two years ago would most certainly not still exist as a station aircheck, unless it somehow got misplaced or was taken by an employee as a souvenir. This means there is a very real possibility that this upload (and the tape it was made from) is the only copy of that particular station’s broadcast day between the hours of 3:30-5:30 that still exists anywhere in the world. That might not mean much to some, but for the same reason that fans collect vintage concert fliers, fans also see value in collecting television as it aired. In fact, it need not be fans that are collecting this material, but simply those who see
value in preserving something that would otherwise not be preserved, for preservation’s sake.

The nostalgia site has also recently introduced an initiative, dubbed “Workprint Wednesdays”, designed to encourage the uploading of workprints (a rough cut of a film or television episode made during the editing process) each Wednesday. It should be noted that, while often of extremely low quality and rarely released to the public on commercial releases, it was a workprint that led to one of the more well-known site shutdowns of the past decade, dubbed “Operation D-Elite.” Hours before the theatrical release of *Star Wars Episode III* (George Lucas 2005), a workprint of the film was uploaded to the site Elite Torrents, which in turn led the MPAA to launch an investigation which led to the eventual shutdown of the site, along with jail terms and fines for those involved with the site’s operation. This was a rare example of a workprint being released for a film that had yet to see its initial theatrical release, whereas the majority of workprints in circulation (and all of the workprints uploaded to the nostalgia site) are of films that have long since left their theatrical run.

Some workprints, such as *The Mask* (Chuck Russell 1994), are comic relief (seeing Jim Carey’s antics pre-CG effects are more hilarious than the finished product), and others offer a chance to see films in a new way, such as the workprint for *One Hour Photo* (Mark Romanek 2002), which features a slightly darker narrative tone, or the raw footage for *The Crow* (Alex Proyas 1994), featuring the Skull Cowboy character that was eventually cut, only after designing character effects and filming scenes that offer new depth to the narrative. While this material is likely all held, in vastly superior quality, in studio vaults and personal collections of those involved in the films, the general public
will never have the chance to see this material. Take, for example, the workprint of *Robocop 2* (Irvin Kershner 1990), which features a number of scenes cut from the final version, none of which have been included on both the Image and MGM DVD releases, nor the Blu Ray release (worldwide). For fans looking to view these scenes, the only option is to purchase a copy of the workprint from bootleg sellers, or download a copy off of the nostalgia site (in a sad irony, the only previously available full copy for download was housed on MegaUpload).

One thing that is interesting about workprints, and the sharing of them on torrent sites, is that they have traditionally been the currency of tape trading circles and bootleg sales. One site, Asylum of Oblivion, charges $12 USD per workprint, which is steep when the product being sold is a washed out, multi-generation VHS dub recorded to a blank DVD. In the last few years, more and more of these workprints have begun to appear on the internet, often on public trackers such as Demonoid, and clips from them have managed to stay on YouTube (although many have been taken down for Terms Of Use violations). Whenever someone stands to profit financially from others’ work, the intent is no longer to archive and preserve for others to view, but rather to profit from material that is rare and valuable in the eyes of fans. So, in a reaction to this, the nostalgia site’s initiative means that one need not spend a penny to see what amounts to mostly a curio piece from the filmmaking process.

Because of their rough quality, workprints become novelty items, relics of a film’s production process and usually only of interest to fans of the film or fans of the filmmaking process itself. Despite the fact that the odd workprint does offer the exclusive chance to view a radically different version of a film, such as the *Sliver* (Phillip Noyce
1993) workprint (which breaks off into an unused narrative tangent that culminates in Sharon Stone and William Baldwin flying a plane into the crater of a volcano, drastically different than the theatrical ending), most feature no more than ten minutes of unused or alternate footage, which can often be found on special edition releases as deleted scenes. The true value of the nostalgia site lies elsewhere, in its preservation of material that would otherwise be unavailable, either because the copies existing in official archives are damaged or fragile, or because there are no copies held in official archives and those copies “in the wild” are at risk of disappearing altogether.

**The Tonight Show**

Remember my mention of airchecks? The nostalgia site (which does, in fact, refer to itself as a “nostalgia tracker”) also holds some rather unique Johnny Carson era *Tonight Show* (NBC 1954) episodes, specifically a series of six episodes from 1971 that are sourced from station aircheck tapes. This means that the episodes are not only unique for containing material never before released through official VHS or DVD sets, but they are a surviving record of the entire broadcast, including commercials and station IDs. This is quite an important find, as this was also the year that Sony introduced the first VCR (the VO-1600), which used ¾ inch UMATIC tapes (an early pre-cursor to VHS), and could only have been purchased by a small handful of wealthy individuals due to its high cost. In a pre-VHS climate, not to mention a mostly pre-VCR climate, close to nothing was being recorded by home viewers from television sets, so these six episodes
are a record of television from an era that few may have had a glimpse at (had they not been around to experience it first-hand).

Recently, Jeff Sotzing, Johnny Carson’s nephew and president of Carson Entertainment (the company that owns the rights to Carson’s *Tonight Show* episodes) announced that all 3,300 hours of existing *Tonight Show* footage had been digitized and catalogued in an online archive by Deluxe Archive Solutions, a company that specializes in digitizing media archiving for many Hollywood studios. Previously, there was no simple and convenient way to find specific jokes or references, as the only record that existed was a simple list of guests and air-dates. By assembling an searchable online transcript archive of each show, specific phrases, jokes, and references can now be found instantly by those looking to utilize footage from the extensive amount of material. On the topic of making the large amount of media easily searchable, Deluxe Archive Solutions’ vice president Tyler Leshney commented that the more searchable content is, the more valuable it becomes. In addition to this, Sotzing remarked that Carson loved to watch old programs, and would himself be fascinated with the entire digitization process (Gold).

Mentioned in an LA Times article that discusses this digitization project is the fact that the digital archive only covers the era of Carson’s reign post-1972, as the master tapes from 1962-1972 were taped over by NBC due to the high cost of blank tape and a somewhat casual attitude to the preservation of television programming. Because of this, the only copies of these shows known to exist (according to the article) are low quality black and white Kinescopes. But we know this to not be true, as there are copies that exist from various sources, none of which survive through official channels, and many of
which are in a state that renders them unwatchable. The UCLA Film and Television archive holds a number of pre-1972 Carson episodes, and there are no doubt copies that have been acquired by fans of the show through tape trades over the years from fan-taped sources.

To get back to the six episodes that are available on the nostalgia site, the following episodes are from a single upload on November 23, 2011:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Episode Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 6, 1971</td>
<td>On one of Johnny's nights off, Woody Allen fills in as guest host. This recording is of the first 53 minutes of the show only.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 21, 1971</td>
<td>Johnny has the week off and Joey Bishop fills in as guest host. Joey looks for &quot;untapped talent&quot; in the audience. Bob Uecker comes on to discuss some of his spectacularly bad baseball career. A complete 90 minute show.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 28, 1971</td>
<td>Music from the winners of the National Harmonica Contest. Paul Harvey stops by and talks politics, news, and society. This show is missing the last 2 minutes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 5, 1971</td>
<td>After the monologue, we get a visit from Carnac the Magnificent! A few of the New York Giants stop by to give Johnny and Ed a workout. Walter J. Hickel, former Secretary of the Interior to Richard Nixon, discusses his career in the administration and his political views. Then a very funny interview with Robert Goulet followed by some hilarity with Charlie Callas. A complete 90 minute show.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Episode Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 8, 1971</td>
<td>This show is missing the first 30 minutes but begins with the band under the direction of Lawrence Welk! Shirley Bassey sings and discusses a bizarre incident from her past. Then comedy and discussion with Dick Gregory and finally Jerry Baker, author of &quot;Plants Are Like People&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 26, 1971</td>
<td>Victor Buono discusses dieting. Comedy troupe Ace Trucking Co. (featuring young Fred Willard) presents a Halloweened-themed skit. William F. Buckley discusses his life and career. This show is missing the last 12 minutes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Tonight Show episodes

Unfortunately, not all of the episodes are complete, with the exception of two that are full ninety-minute episodes. The UCLA archive does hold six episodes from 1971 as well, but all are from March and April of the year, and according to Research & Study Center Manager Mark Quigley (in response to my inquiry on their status), they are all from ½” non-standardized video reels that are not playable due to the format. Because Sony’s UMATIC VCR had just begun to be marketed to home consumers, it is not surprising that these were recorded on a ½” reel to reel VTR. The difficulty with this format, however, is that until 1969 (and even thereafter, depending on one’s equipment) each brand of reel to reel recorder had a different standard associated with it, therefore a reel of tape recorded on one brand’s device would not play back on a device manufactured by a different company, and vice versa. This means that the copy that UCLA holds would need to be played back on the specific type and brand of machine that recorded it, and they either do not know the model or are unable to locate a functioning one.

Therefore, the episodes that were uploaded to the nostalgia site remain some of the only freely accessible, and publicly viewable episodes of The Tonight Show from
1971, although they are not exclusive to the site itself. In fact, these episodes have made the rounds it seems, and clips from them are available on YouTube and elsewhere on the internet. When asked about the source of the upload on the nostalgia site, the uploader revealed they had bought DVD-R copies from someone who was selling old television programs. The uploader of the Youtube clips, when asked about their origin, could not recall where exactly he had obtained the material, but he is certain they are from a tape trade years back with contacts in the United States. While the origin of the episodes is a mystery, they have been circulated amongst the tape trading community for years, and can now be viewed without the cumbersome task of mailing VHS tapes in a trade (and without compensating someone else for the privilege of viewing them).

It is worth noting that the clips of the episodes on YouTube are not as meticulously catalogued as the upload on the nostalgia site, which featured air dates and episode details. The YouTube uploads simply list the air date as 1971, with other users providing the month via a video comment in one instance. Not quite an anarchive, but the lack of episode number or exact air date (along with the fact that there are no full episodes, only short clips) gives the YouTube clips a novelty status, whereas the nostalgia site provides something that can be notated and preserved.

**Star Wars**

As mentioned before, the media format can often be a stumbling block when it comes to preserving vintage material, with ½” reel to reel video tape perhaps being the most difficult to find a means of playback, as well as the most troublesome for obtaining a high quality image. But sometimes the format is the reason for preservation, with
extinct formats having offered their own unique versions of films, limitations of the formats forcing the creation of an alternate version. More recently, there have been “unrated” DVD releases of films featuring more footage than the theatrical release. But what if there was a release that offered less than the theatrical version? Surely this would be considered inferior and not worthy of preservation, if that preservation involved such difficult and complicated steps as a telecine conversion?

When looking at a film like *Star Wars* (George Lucas 1977), everything has value and everything is worth preserving, no matter what efforts need to be spent. And it just so happens that a unique project focused on *Star Wars*, which digitized the Super8 versions of *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner 1980) using professional techniques, completed by fans for no profit. Going by the name of Puggo on the internet forum OriginalTrilogy.com, an individual managed to acquire (on loan from another user by the name of Boba Feta) a copy of the Super8 version of both *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back*, and properly telecine’d (the process of converting film prints to videotape and DVD) them to a single DVD. While I may make that process seem relatively simple, it involved an incredible amount of work and expertise in order to achieve the end results.

To start, each reel of film (2 for each movie) was run through a Workprinter XP telecine device using a Sony TRV-900 camera, which was then imported into Sony Vegas and the reels merged. This is fairly labour-intensive work, as around 6 frames are captured per second, and each scene change requires the camera’s white balance to be rechecked (therefore, this is not an automated process). Then, the audio was captured from a different Super8 projector, and some minor audio tweaking was done to remove
hum and noise, and fix any distortion that may have occurred. Then the audio sync was
done by hand, compensating for any issues that occurred with frame rate differences
moving from Super8 to DVD. Puggo even filled in a few seconds of silence from the
Super8 reels with audio from the DVD release, in order to avoid jarring silence.

A few months after the project was started, Puggo finished the conversion process
and created a DVD in December 2006. Within weeks, Boba Feta had made copies and
sent them out to regulars on the message board, which shortly after were distributed via
torrents within the message board and on public sites, including The Pirate Bay. Custom
DVD artwork was created by Boba Feta, and all technical details (along with the cover
art) were stored on OrginalTrilogy.com’s fan edits section (although this is technically a
fan preservation, and therefore was listed under the Preservations sub-section). In
addition to the vintage look of Super8 film stock and cropping that occurred for the
1.33:1 aspect ratio, the Super8 releases were heavily edited versions of the films that
totalled 67 minutes combined (much shorter than the combined length of 245 minutes for
the theatrical versions). Other unique quirks included different audio mixes, different
audio takes of characters’ lines, and the complete omission of Empire’s surprise ending
where it is revealed that Darth Vader is Luke’s father. An example of format-based time-
compression of the films long before their alteration would become a heated topic
amongst fans, the restoration of these Super8 versions demonstrate the sophistication that
individuals employ in amateur preservation projects, making the word “amateur” seem
ill-fitting.

Later in 2008, Puggo would also release telecine versions of a 16mm print of Star
Wars (dubbed the “Puggo Grande” edition), which used two separate 16mm prints, one
from a North American release featuring the original opening credit crawl (without “Episode IV”) and the other a version containing Swedish subtitles and the original mono mix of the film (the other print was missing a line of dialogue, “Close the blast doors”, that was included in the initial theatrical release but missing from the releases that followed). Puggo muxed the video from the English release and the audio from the Swedish release, combined into a preservation of the original 16mm prints. Actually, 16mm prints of *Star Wars* were never sold to the public (unlike the Super8 versions, which were marketed to home consumers), therefore this is likely derived from one of the 16mm copies that were once held in libraries or other small institutions, none of which can be considered legally owned copies outside of those institutions (although no one would be bothered with prosecution for a 16mm print today). Considering this also combines different video and audio sources, it is not really a preservation as much as a fan-edit and preservation paired together. Regardless, it creates an interesting visual aesthetic, something which the people at SaveStarWars.com refer to as “Star Wars Grindhouse”, and allows a new generation lacking 16mm projectors to view a version of the film that would otherwise be lost to time.

With most fan preservations and fan edits, the actual distribution is never done by the same people doing the preservation work (as a distancing measure from possible prosecution, perhaps). Along with many other *Star Wars* fan edits and preservations (including news reports, guest appearances, and other miscellaneous media debris), the nostalgia site holds copies of both Puggo preservation efforts uploaded by individuals, both which are still available, and both of which feature incredibly detailed notes as to the process and equipment used to create them.
Saturday Night Live

Gritty 8mm film prints and nostalgic programming blocks are rare enough finds, but the nostalgia site also helps house another important project that preserves a television program that is nothing short of an institution. Saturday Night Live (NBC/Broadway Video 1975) might seem an odd choice, considering it is still rerun in abundance on comedy networks worldwide, and is quite well archived. And for the first five seasons, the show has been meticulously preserved and released to the public through five separate DVD releases, featuring an assortment of special features.

Coincidentally, it is the sixth season that saw Lorne Michaels leave as producer and be replaced by Jean Doumanian, as well as a mass exodus of all prior cast members and all but one writer. It is also the sixth season that has been described by fans as the worst season of the show, ever. Joe Piscopo, who joined the show in the sixth season, remarked “…this was America’s favourite television show, and yet here we were, taking it right into the toilet” (qtd. in Shales 213). Perhaps not so coincidentally, this season is where the DVD sets stopped, citing expensive music licensing costs as the reason (Lambert). It is perfectly reasonable to assume that what is thought of as the worst season in the show’s history (and the tumultuous few seasons that followed) would not generate enough of a return to compensate for the high licensing costs, and so the fate of future seasons is left in limbo.

Of course, fans of the show are not happy to wait around and hope for the best, but instead have been creating an archive of the entire show’s run since before the first official DVD season set was released. Even though archiving of the show might seem a rather straightforward affair, there are a number of versions of each episode aired:
2 versions on the premiere night

-one for the East Coast (live)

-one for the West Coast (not live, may feature alternate sketches from the live Eastern version)

Multiple Versions for reruns

-90 minute version for NBC reruns (may feature replacement sketches, and other alterations)

-60 minute version for Comedy Central and other syndicated airings (heavily edited)

Despite the Eastern broadcast being live, and therefore seemingly being the “master” version, sketches used as a replacement in reruns can sometimes come from the dress rehearsal (which is also taped, and generally features one or two extra sketches not included in the live airing), adding unique content not found in the live broadcast.

Combined, there is a rather lengthy assortment of sketches that can come from multiple versions of one particular episode, leading to a complex archiving task for completists.

On the nostalgia site, a large number of episodes have been uploaded in various versions from multiple sources (some come from bootleg DVDs purchased from online sellers, others come from personal VHS tapings, others come from mystery uploads found on the net on other sites). This is coupled with another site, known as The SNL Archives, which compiles an extensive database of all episodes, cast members and musical guests, as well as all sketches and the performers in each. Adding to its usefulness is the ability to search for individual recurring sketches, providing a tally of various factoids and statistics on the show. For instance, if one wanted to see every
instance of “The Joe Pesci Show” (with Jim Breuer as Pesci), one needs merely click on its title and a listing of each sketch will be generated along with its air date (in this case, 12.02.1995 / 01.20.1996 / 03.16.1996 / 05.18.1996 / 11.23.1996 / 01.11.1997 / 04.12.1997 / 11.22.1997). Another tab provides a visual reference of every impression performed during the sketches (See Fig. 1). The work of one person, The SNL Archives maintains its accuracy through personally verifying the sketches from copies of episodes viewed by the webmaster, whereas the actual labour involved in maintaining and creating (and updating) the site is simply time-consuming hard work.

Figure 1: The SNL Archives (source: The SNL Archives)
Starting with Season 6, the ill-received season that served as Jean Doumanian’s only stint as the show’s producer (she was fired after twelve episodes), the nostalgia site had a series of DVDs uploaded at the end of 2009, which comprised of the entire 13 episodes from the season.² Multiple versions of episodes 6 and 13 were included on the discs, the former having two versions of differing quality, and the latter being both a cut and uncut version of the episode. Clocking in at roughly 31 GB over the span of eight discs, the season was complete, despite the duplicate episodes in differing versions.

Within a matter of days of the final disc being uploaded to the site, another user converted the DVDs to a different video format with a much smaller file size yet offering comparable quality. Not only this, but the user “cleaned up” the season by editing together the different versions of the same episodes and applying light audio noise reduction. For episode 13 (no host credited), the edited version was missing two sketches and had two sketches from prior episodes inserted in their place. For the converted versions that were later uploaded to the site, the missing sketches were re-edited into the cut version, which was of higher quality, and the duplicate sketches from prior episodes were removed, creating a new version of higher quality with the inclusion of the missing sketches (in lower quality, only for those sketches). For episode 6, a 60-minute edited version was used as the primary source because it was of higher quality, and the lower quality (unedited) version’s sketches were utilized. The end result is a complete set of Season 6 in the highest available quality wherever possible, without no duplicate sketches or redundant material, preserved by fans and shared with others for free.

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² The first five seasons, while initially having had episodes uploaded earlier in the site’s existence, were removed from the site as official DVD sets were released, and currently only the sixth season and onwards are allowed on the site.
Ironically, the original eight DVDs (before the cleanup of episodes 6 and 13) are still being sold online, at profit to the sellers, through sites such as iOffer for $20-$30 before shipping costs, far more than the cost for blank discs and shipping costs (negating the argument that the price is merely to offset the cost of time and materials). In fact, one recent sale on iOffer netted one seller $100 for five seasons of the show (seasons 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10). The great distinction between the work being done by amateur archivists on sites such as the nostalgia site and individuals selling this material is that the nostalgia site aims to make material available free of charge, simply for the love of it, with users becoming quite irate when they find out their work is being sold by others. Those who sell bootleg DVDs stand to profit quite handsomely depending on the rarity of the product, and unfortunately it is often only by purchasing rare material from these sellers that it can be uploaded on other sites for free. One might see it as liberation from bootleggers who are, very clearly, profiting off of someone else’s material illegally, and sharing the material with others in the absence of any official release without any monetary gain. While piracy does not require monetary gain (as FBI warning screens at the start of VHS and DVD releases repeatedly remind us), removing profiteering aspects can be seen to legitimize the work being done in assembling miniature web-archives, motivated by the belief that the material should be freely accessible, rather than keeping the material rare in order to turn a tidy profit. The more freely accessible material is for free, the less likely someone is to pay for it (which helps combat bootleg profits, but can harm legitimate sales as well, which is why care is given on the nostalgia site to remove anything available on an official release). Coupled with Tyler Leshney’s previously mentioned comment, regarding material increasing in value the more searchable it is, the

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3 [http://www.ioffer.com/offer_transactions/show/10813815](http://www.ioffer.com/offer_transactions/show/10813815)
nostalgia site can be seen as increasing *intangible* value while decreasing *actual* value. Unfortunately, this can also harm legitimate releases, something which Iain Robert Smith has observed, noting how “the availability of bootlegs can potentially make it uneconomical for distributors to license and restore films for official release” (par. 8). However, it should be remembered that the key demographic for the release of catalog titles is often a pre-existing fan base. Given the choice of a less-than-optimal bootleg, with faded and fuzzy video and noisy audio, or a pristine restored release, it is a no-brainer that fans would gladly spend their money for the restored version. Therefore, when discussing film and television material such as that which we have looked at so far, bootleg releases (whether for free or a fee) pose little threat to official releases.

“The Television Version”

Television versions of films are something that have largely disappeared over the past decade, in part due to the end of the strange practice of bowdlerizing films for prime-time viewing on major networks. Whereas it was once commonplace for a film to have its dialogue re-dubbed for television, it is now simply removed with a brief moment of silence. Or in the case of some modern release patterns, films are released in tamer theatrical cuts and unrated DVD cuts, requiring little work to make theatrical cuts suitable for television broadcast.

While the often comical redubbed TV dialogue has gained cult-like status of its own (see Table 2 for examples), the televised version of films would also occasionally require certain scenes to be trimmed or removed due to violence and nudity. When the
excised content amounted to a matter of seconds, the shortened length of the final product was negligible. In fact, the removal of objectionable content could often bring a 95 minute film down to the required length.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Original Dialogue</th>
<th>Television Version Dialogue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Big Lebowski (Joel Coen 1998)</td>
<td>“You see what happens when you fuck a stranger in the ass? … This is what happens when you fuck a stranger in the ass!”</td>
<td>“You see what happens when you find a stranger in the alps? … This is what happens when you feed a stoner scrambled eggs!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lethal Weapon (Richard Donner 1987)</td>
<td>“…and this is a real fucking gun”</td>
<td>“…and this is a real firing gun”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Usual Suspects (Bryan Singer 1995)</td>
<td>“Give me the keys you fucking cocksucker.”</td>
<td>&quot;Give me the keys you fairy godmother.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: TV Version dialogue

However, in the instance of films that were already at the required length prior to edits, or films that were too short, material needed to be added to pad out the length. It is this practice that has led to the television version of certain films to be highly sought after by fans, due to the inclusion of material not found in any other version of the film. It is worth nothing that this extra footage was often culled from alternate takes which ran long, or dialogue that was excised due to slow pacing, all material cut for good reason. Because television versions were given such little care in maintaining their artistic representation (it was uncommon for a director to be involved with the editing process, except for rare exceptions), it was fair game to include any footage that was in acceptable shape and could be seamlessly reinserted into the film. Because they are bastardized versions, there have been only a few released officially, such as John Carpenter’s Halloween (1978) which had a limited edition DVD release of its extended TV version.
(while having previously made the version available in a 2-disc special edition of the original film). *Halloween* is a unique exception, as Carpenter and some of the cast creating new footage specifically for the television version during a three day re-shoot. Other films have had some scenes included as bonus features for comic effect, such as *Scarface* (Brian De Palma 1983), or as deleted scenes, such as the special edition release of *Repo Man* (Alex Cox 1984).

For simplicity’s sake, television versions of films can be grouped into two categories, which determine the reason for its preservation: films that have been censored and contain laughable dialogue replacement and/or alternate takes and camera angles, and films that have been expanded to fill out longer time slots using deleted footage. More simply put, there are television versions that are sought because of their ridiculously bad presentation, and those that are sought because they provide more of a film to be seen. Because they were shown on television in varying degrees of repetition, there have grown different degrees of rarity for certain films. Ultimately, whether or not a television version of a film exists beyond network archives comes down to whether or not someone had the notion to record one particular airing, and for some reason decided not to record over it. And from there, it is unlikely that anyone other than a fan of the film would take the time to make it available through tape-trading circles, or digitize it and make it available on the internet. This creates an element of treasure hunting for those looking to obtain a copy, as it is very likely that someone holds a copy on tape but has no realization that it is worth anything to anyone. An aggregate of early studies on VCR usage found that the majority of material recorded by home users was network affiliate programming,

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4 These two categories are not entirely separate entities, and often TV versions of films are a mixture of both to varying extents
often prime-time airings (Shatzer and Lindlof 113), which would seem to correlate with
the program blocks that find their way onto the nostalgia site (which are either derived
from afternoon or prime-time airings, but almost never overnight or early morning
airings). It is the network airing of films that should, according to data, be the most
common and easiest to find. However, it is a prime-time network airing that has become
one of the most legendary of all, and has in turn sparked an elaborate and extensive fan
preservation.

Richard Donner’s 1978 film Superman was originally released to theatres in a 143
minute version, and was not viewable in that length again until 1983. For the original
VHS and Beta release in 1979, Warner Home Video (then known as WCI) had certain
portions of the film sped up or removed in order to fit a 127 minute runtime. The actual
reason for this is unclear, but was either a result of technical limitations of the format at
the time or a cost-cutting measure on the part of VCI in order to use shorter and less-
expensive tapes. This was accomplished by speeding up non-dialogue scenes and
removing the end credits entirely, leaving only a crudely edited together section featuring
the final seconds of the end credits (featuring the copyright notice), a static image of the
cast and crew listing from the end of the theatrical trailer, followed by a message reading
“Next Year Superman II”. In 1983, the original theatrical release was issued on VHS, this
time in its unaltered 143 minute version.

Before this happened, however, the rights to the film reverted to its producer
Alexander Salkind in 1981. Looking to capitalize on the film’s success, as well as the
market for televised feature films, Salkind put together a unique version of the film that
clocked in at 188 minutes. The extra footage consisted of deleted material from the
original theatrical release, as well as more of John Williams’ score which was not heard in the original release. Slightly trimmed from this 188 minute “Salkind International Extended Cut”, which used almost every piece of cut footage, some in an unfinished state, ABC’s first airing of its slightly trimmed 182 minute version in February 1982 split the film into two parts over two nights. This was aired again in November later that year, before the subsequent airings reverted to the theatrical version. In 1985, Warner Brothers became the rights-holder once again, and the film was screened one more time in its theatrical cut on CBS, and was later offered in either format to stations in the late 1980s. Until 1994, most stations would air one or the other, usually editing down the extended cut in order to fit more commercials into the running time.

Then, in May of 1994, the Los Angeles station KCOP aired the original 188 minute Salkind Extended International Cut (for the first time domestically). Because this was the first airing in America of the full 188 minute version, this has become known to US fans as the “KCOP Version”. While the extended cut of *Superman* has become extremely popular amongst fans of the film, it has been something only a true fan can appreciate. This is due to the technical problems that plague the bootlegged, often multigenerational VHS dupes that fans are forced to view. At this point, nearly every copy in existence is at least a second or third generation copy (sometimes even further down the chain). Even though the 1994 airing came at a time when high quality VHS recorders were commonplace in the home, little information exists as to how many copies were sourced from this single airing or the small handful of reported other airings that followed thereafter.
Any copies from the early 80s airing would likely have been on lower quality machines, and the very nature of tape media would ensure that it would have degraded significantly over the years by age alone, not to mention the wear each copy would suffer with each duplication process it went through. The end result is a terribly washed out, poor quality version that would be worth suffering through only for die-hard fans. On top of this, the extended cut was prepared on 16mm film and mixed with a mono soundtrack, as the resolution of television broadcasts would not benefit from 35mm prints, and stereo broadcasts as a rule were still a few years away. When a director’s cut was put together for the official DVD release of the film, 8 minutes were added to the original theatrical running time, bring the length to 151 minutes. While this is the preferred version for the film’s director, it still falls short of the length of the TV versions. It seemed that this would be the longest version available in any acceptable form, due to the heavily degraded quality of the existing copies of extended cut. That is, until a collective of fans, working entirely unbeknownst to each other at first, managed to acquire enough high-quality material to create a restored version of the extended cut.

For years, a fan by the name of Alex Serpa had been searching wherever he could for high quality copies of the extended cut of Superman. Around 2009, he decided that he had sourced enough material to make a reasonably good restoration of the Salkind International Extended Cut, and began work on compiling the various sources together. As he would make progress, he would post some of his work on YouTube, where to this day, a recreation of ABC’s original second-night recap can be seen, created using the original audio voiceover from ABC’s 1982 airing and footage painstakingly edited
together from the official releases\textsuperscript{5}. This caught the attention of Jim Bowers, who runs the site CapedWonder.com, a site dedicated to the legacy of Christopher Reeve’s incarnation as Superman and all things related to the respective films. Bowers offered Serpa his own personal 16mm copy of the extended cut, which considering its lineage, is as good as a master copy. From this, a near perfect version of the Salkind International Extended Cut could be made, even though it would come at the cost of a tremendous amount of effort.

While Serpa worked on his restoration of the extended cut, elsewhere another group were working on their own effort to restore the film. On the primarily Star Wars-based site OriginalTrilogy.com, a forum thread was created with updates on a restoration effort for the extended cut of *Superman*. This one was being edited by a user under the name PhineasBg, and was being referred to as “Superman The Movie: The KCOP Cut”. Coincidentally, Serpa had been talking with another individual by the handle “Wyatt Earp” about a restoration project he was working on, which just so happened to be the KCOP Cut version with PhineasBg (*A Super Team…par.3*).

By pooling resources, both teams (Serpa with Bowers, and the KCOP team) collaborated and were able to speed up the process considerably, with each team being able to offer something the other could not, allowing for the complete restoration of the full 188 minute extended version. Currently the projected release of the 3-DVD restoration is set for September 25, 2012, however no one involved in the restoration (either the individuals or the sites they are involved or affiliated with) will be distributing the release. On CapedWonder.com as well as other internet forums where the project is tracked, a disclaimer makes clear mention that the restored extended cut is not to be sold, nor used to make a profit of any kind. When at the time of the release all involved will

\textsuperscript{5} http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgWeN08tooQ
have spent around three years of their lives contributing significant time and labour to the project, the fact that none stand to profit in any way speaks to the spirit behind the project. In fact, the insistence that no one profit in any way, shape or form demonstrates an attempt on the part of those involved to distance themselves from profiteering pirates, and therefore legitimize their work as a serious archival process in an as-yet determined realm of copyright.

Television versions have an element of nostalgia inherent within them, from the very fact that they originate from a television broadcast. Watching a film on DVD versus a VHS copy taped off-air with commercials as-aired are two very different experiences. The inclusion of commercials gives the television version a localized identity, situated in the time and place it was aired (and recorded from). This colors the film to such an extent that two airings from different dates will offer entirely different experiences for the viewer. Despite the hindsight value assigned to commercials and other throwaway television debris, most people who physically sat and recorded television programming at the time of viewing would pause during commercials and resume when the commercials ended, to avoid having to watch them on further viewings. Those who didn’t avoid them altogether during the recording process, research suggests, would fast forward through them on playback. These two habits were referred to as zapping (for the former) and zipping (for the latter) (Papazian 103-4), although these two terms were so misused in literature that they are almost useless for making sense of user habits. A range of studies in 1986 found that between 30-50% of VCR users regularly “zapped” commercials (avoided recording them in the first place), and 47-73% “zipped” (fast forwarded upon playback), while adults tended to “zip” more than three times as much as college students.
It stands to reason that the material that has survived with commercials intact, possibly for this reason, has been primarily material recorded by those who were younger at the time (further connecting a sense of childhood nostalgia), or material recorded using the VCR’s timer feature.

Those who utilized the PVR’s precursor and set a VCR to record when they were away from the TV would end up with a complete recording of the broadcast, and it is generally these recordings that make up the versions that are uploaded to websites, commercials and all. In fact, it is relatively uncommon for film and television broadcasts to be uploaded with their commercials left in, either due to the original recording having removed them or the uploader finding them a nuisance and removing them during the analog to digital conversion process. Therefore, few TV versions on the internet have commercials left in, and we can draw a distinction between the nostalgia site, and another site we are about to look at, a site dealing with paracinema: the nostalgia site is more concerned with preserving unique presentations of film and television, whereas the paracinema site is concerned with preserving unique versions of film and television. Because of this, commercials are not seen as added value on the paracinema site, and the majority of uploads (perhaps even as high as 99%, but most definitely above 90%) are in versions that preserve the cinematic feel of films by the removal of anything not a part of the film itself (which includes coming attractions from the original VHS tape, commercials, and anything else that is not a part of the film proper).

It is this practice that gives the paracinema site a feel of a proper, academic archive, one that would rival any other in terms of size and rarity of material (albeit, with material that would not traditionally be found in academic archives). The organization
scheme and the site’s own structure and formatting allow for the searching and lookup of a film through a number of means, including searching by its IMDB (Internet Movie Data Base) ID number, year of release, and the usual criteria such as title and genre.

**Port of Paracinema**

The paracinema site is a home for films that have fallen by the wayside over the years, from training films to direct-to-video VHS titles, early cinema and television specials, and everything else that has found itself without an official release in the past few decades. Despite a large majority of films on the site falling into the category of what Jeffery Sconce termed *paracinema* (horror, sci-fi, arthouse and avant-garde cinema), the over 79,000 torrents on the site represent the majority of cinema’s underappreciated and forgotten works going back as far as the invention of film itself. While the material is often North American-centric, there is a large amount of foreign films as well (which, thankfully, are not categorized as “Foreign” but instead are categorized with other genre films worldwide). Italian and Swedish horror films can be found alongside American and Canadian films, and films that have never seen an English dubbed or subtitled release can often be found with fan-made subtitles. The sheer number of films can be overwhelming, but the intent is quite simple: to preserve cinema’s leftovers, the films that no one else wants or cares about that are nonetheless valuable for the simple fact that no one else wants them.

The site’s layout is the same as most torrent sites, with a categorization structure for sorting uploads (Action, Adventure, Comedy, Documentary, Drama, eBooks,
Exploitation, Family, Gore, Hidden Gems, Horror, Martial Arts, OST, Other, Sci-Fi, Thriller, Western, XXX). When browsing through films, the film’s title, along with its release year, can be seen. In addition to this, the origin of the upload is listed, such as whether it was sourced from a DVD (DVDrrip), a television broadcast (TVrip), a VHS tape (VHSrip) or even from a video-on-demand service such as Netflix (VOD). This information is often used to determine whether or not one version of a film is superior to another. Much like the nostalgia site, the paracinema site requires its users to register an account before being able to view any of the site’s content, and as of January 2012 is also an invite-only site (meaning the only means of joining the site must come from an already registered member sending an invite code). With around 20,000 registered users and four times as many active torrents, the site has grown to be one of the largest resources for forgotten cinema on the internet and boasts a thriving community of users that provide incredibly detailed and professional uploads of material that, by and large, can not be found anywhere else on the internet. One feature that separates this site from others is its clear focus on a particular type of filmic content. While its exclusionary criteria is designed to avoid lawsuits from major studios on one hand, it also serves to entice a particularly niche audience. Even though large studios are not excluded as a whole, large studio pictures and franchises are, including cult franchises such as Robocop, Friday the 13th, and A Nightmare on Elm Street. The philosophy relates to the simple fact that those films are in no danger of being lost, and are in print at the current time. In addition, the site lists criteria that decide whether or not a film is acceptable for inclusion:
“1 - The movie has a rating lower than 5.0 on IMDB and has not had a theatrical release within the past 12 months.
2 - The movie was made on a low budget. A low budget is debatable, so if you’re not sure, please ask.
3 - The movie is rare. If Google doesn’t turn up much, and a physical copy is hard to find, it’s probably rare.”

Based on these deciding factors, the site excludes all major studio releases that have had generally favourable receptions at the box office and home releases, as decided mostly by the IMDB rating for a film and box office returns. While these simple rules may be vague and are at times not followed, the general aim is to archive the films that would be difficult to obtain through normal channels. This means that a film which can be purchased legally or is available on larger torrent sites (such as The Pirate Bay) has no need to be preserved, as it likely has no danger of becoming scarce or unknown. The site’s goal is to catalogue everything else, regardless of its apparent quality or reputation. Therefore, it is the home (and in some cases, the only home) of many direct-to-video films, independent shorts, and other rare films. When originally housed on the shelves of actual video stores, these forgotten films found their audiences by association with the films they often mimicked, such as the Chuck Norris clones in action/kung-fu films, or strange genre-less films that would be placed alongside other genre films simply by the necessity of genre-based shelving. “The piling up of videocassettes, within video store inventories…allowed for the knitting together of multiple lines of association between films” which often “served to enhance the intelligibility and reduce the strangeness of
any single one” (Straw 8). On their own, listed amongst other unusual titles on a torrent site that does not include the mainstream films upon which they were conceived to co-exist with, the value of these films may be hard to perceive. To those who remember them (either individually, or as part of a cinematic cycle) from his or her own experiences visiting video stores during their initial release, the value is priceless, and the nostalgic memory of the video store ritual (a visit every Friday night, perhaps) becomes fused with the films themselves.

**Netflix and Online Media Sources**

One of the aims of the site is to archive the *best* available copy of rare and forgotten films. Often this means a film will see its first upload in the form of a VHS rip, which may be of rather low quality. Let’s take the 1989 film *The Wizard* (Todd Holland) as an example, which has been uploaded numerous times to the site. The film, which is a huge source of nostalgia for those who grew up in the 8-bit Nintendo era and has a large cult following, was available on VHS only until August 29th, 2006. Initially, a copy of this VHS version was uploaded to the site, until a DVD rip was uploaded, at which point the VHS version was removed from the site. At that point, the DVD release was the highest quality official release that could be purchased for home viewing. More recently, there has become one other release of the film that can be viewed at home, this time in high definition. Netflix has been, perhaps, the best legal source of rare and forgotten films in the past few years (at least if you live in the US, where its catalogue is full of films that have not seen a release since VHS), and it recently included *The Wizard* in full
streaming HD. Not only is this a welcome sight for fans, coming only five years after the DVD release (seeing as it took 8 years from DVD’s debut for it to be released in the format), but it has also been described as one of the best looking HD streaming films that Netflix offers (Rowe).

Despite the fact that Netflix is offering the film as part of their regular service, and that their service is very reasonably priced, there is no assurance that the film will not see a change of rights ownership at any given moment (or some other legal stipulation) that will see the film pulled from Netflix, and perhaps not seen again in HD for an unknown length of time. Because of this uncertainty, it was inevitable that a copy would be made by fans (much like one would backup important information on a hard drive), and so a copy was uploaded to the paracinema site on December 11, 2011, this time in 1280x720 resolution (versus the 640x352 resolution of the DVD rip). It should be noted that this HD rip was not made for the site, but was uploaded to newsgroups (a much older form of data sharing where most pirated material appears online first). In this case, the site merely preserved the findings of a user, as the uploader mentions that they found the HD rip online, whereas the DVD rip has a statement that it was ripped specifically for the site. A Google search on December 12th, 2011 shows two newsgroup sites where the HD version can be downloaded, however it should be noted that newgroup access requires fees, meaning the majority of people will find these two links useless. A search for “The Wizard, HD, 1989” turns up a number of YouTube links, which when viewed show a redirect video stating “This Video Has Been Removed”, along with a URL where the video can be viewed (which redirects to paid services or scam sites).
The simplest of cursory Google searches demonstrates that, apart from its upload on the paracinema site, *The Wizard* is nearly impossible to find in an HD format that can be downloaded and either burned to disc or viewed without online access. Perhaps just as importantly, the only legal means to view it through Netflix requires someone to physically reside in the United States (all other Netflix regions do not offer the film). Therefore, its upload on the site serves the intended purpose, as the film can now be viewed by fans worldwide, and were Netflix to remove it from its offered list of films, the upload may be the only reliable source to view the film in HD period.

When films such as this are uploaded, while currently being available through online streaming services, it appears to be a tactic designed to counter the control measures enforced by media providers, limiting where and how a fan (or anyone) can view the material. Netflix requires an internet connection, a Netflix account, the good fortune to reside in a territory where certain films have had rights cleared by the provider, and the hopes that Netflix will still maintain the rights to stream the film to users, all of these being transitory with no assurance that Netflix’s current library will be available in the same form tomorrow. One’s internet connection may go down, an account may be compromised, and films may no longer be offered. Compared to a physical form of media, such as DVDs and Blu Ray discs, streaming films offer no semblance of “ownership”, which leaves fans uneasy about the access to the films at a future date.

Studios prefer this means of access, as it allows them greater control over films with relatively no overhead costs, yet fans of a film will find a way to “own” a copy and reclaim control over how and when they access their favourite film. Even though purchasing a DVD does not literally give someone ownership of a film, it does provide
them with a copy of which they own, to view whenever and wherever they choose. “By subscribing to one of these services, (we are) relinquishing ownership over the content (we) consume…you pay a flat fee…but you don't actually own the (content) you are lent” (Mangalindian par. 6), quoted one CNN article on Amazon’s on-demand library service for their Kindle device, which follows the same business model as other online on-demand media libraries. The desire to create copies of streaming films from services such as Netflix may be a reactionary response to this model of delivery, effectively “owning” a copy of the film through covert means.

Kate Egan’s study on the collecting of “video nasties”, which in turn expanded upon work done by Barbara Klinger, helps to explain this need to “own” and collect, and can be used to understand the collecting of digital versions of films as well. Klinger’s original study focused on the collecting habits of Laserdisc enthusiasts, and found that the primary criteria for collecting habits focused on video and audio quality, with original aspect ratio preservation and optimal audio and video quality creating the preferred version for collectors. Through this, a film’s true value became its technical attributes rather than its cultural or cinematic value, and a film with a crisp widescreen image could become a prized possession, regardless of its artistic or narrative quality (Klinger 136). Egan’s study shifted Klinger’s findings and found that the collection of VHS versions of “Video Nasties”, films banned by the British parliament’s introduction of the Video Recordings Act of 1984, was very much concerned with the physical tapes themselves, not the quality of the sound and image found within. Not only are they collective cultural artifacts, but also “personal meaningful reminders of a key moment in a collector’s individual consumption history” (Egan 204). The paracinema site combines these two
driving forces, and values the collective cultural artifacts (in the form of rare and forgotten films) while striving to obtain the best possible presentation of each film (both visually and aurally). By encouraging complex descriptions for each upload, including the movie poster (or VHS cover scan) and a description of the plot, cast, technical details, and screenshots of the film, a virtual replica of the physical VHS box is created, allowing for an experience akin to the perusing of a video store’s shelves.

Depending on the source of a film’s upload, there are various rules by which the site can decide on whether or not it will be allowed. The general rule is that a film is not safe if it has been released in the past 12 months. Therefore, if a DVD was released this past July, it would not be allowed on the site until next July. Also, a new upload that is in some way superior to a pre-existing upload, such as a higher resolution (720x480 versus 480x320), despite them both being from the same DVD release, would trump the older one and replace it. In general, resolution and file size determine the quality of an upload, with higher values for both being optimal. Because of the criteria used to determine whether or not a film is safe to upload, there is a conscious effort against piracy of films at the initial release, a time when sales numbers can determine whether or not a release is a financial success. For example, the 1984 horror compilation film *Terror in The Aisles* (Andrew J. Kuehn) had, up until September 13, 2011, been only available on VHS. No fewer than five uploads of this film have existed on the site, all in various forms with all but one being variations of the VHS release. The oldest, uploaded in 2007, is a rather low-quality rip from a VHS tape that has tracking issues, not to mention being rather worn to begin with. An upgrade to this was uploaded in March of 2009, however this was from the Japanese Laserdisc, under the title of *That’s Shock!*; which featured hard-coded
(not removable) Japanese subtitles. The one perk to this release was that it was (at the time) the only home release anywhere in the world that was in widescreen, therefore this upload was both an upgrade (with the widescreen aspect ratio restored) while at the same time being a drop in quality due to the hard-coded subtitles. Another version was uploaded in December of 2010, which by all appearances is a drop in quality, as it is half the size (698MB versus 1.57GB for the 2007 upload) yet, due to the self-policing nature of the site’s community, it has slipped through the cracks and still exists on the site.

Finally, on December 29th of 2010, a high-quality VHS rip was uploaded in both a full DVD-R image, and a smaller, compressed version, which is the best available version on the site to date.

Despite all of the work done by the uploaders to rip a definitive version of the film from VHS sources, it was eventually released as a special feature on the September 13, 2011 Blu Ray release of *Halloween 2* (Rick Rosenthal 1981) in full high definition and widescreen, no less. But even though this release is vastly superior to the VHS rips, it will not be allowed on the site until September of 2012, which will force those wanting to view the film in HD to go and purchase the Blu Ray (or, perhaps, search elsewhere on the internet for an HD rip). Through this, an attempt is made by the site to support the film by avoiding piracy-by-convenience during the first year of release, which will hopefully steer customers towards purchasing the product, rather than wait a year to download it for free, but whether or not this actually happens is uncertain. Because Video-on-Demand and other streaming releases do not have a “release date”, per se, and because of the uncertainty of their lifespan, the 12 month rule does not apply to VOD releases, in which case they are held to more of a “get them while you can” criteria. Some VOD releases
have begun to feature an incredibly short “limited release” time, such as *The Vagrant* (Chris Walas 1992), which has already seen its short time on Hulu come and go (although it may very well reappear on the site in the future).

**Alternate Versions**

Although the site contains many unedited and alternate versions of films, it also holds a number of user-created versions. One type, known as a fan composite, involves piecing together all known footage from a film, and compiling it together into a makeshift master cut. While this may seem the most “complete”, it is often pieced together from elements that were deleted for good reason (similar to the television version), and is rarely considered the ultimate version by anyone involved in the production. As a case study, I will use David Cronenberg’s 1982 film *Videodrome*, which has been edited into a number of versions. There is the theatrical cut, which runs 87 minutes, and the uncut version released on home video (and later Laserdisc, DVD, and Blu Ray) which runs 89 minutes. There was also a television version produced, which included additional scenes inserted to pad out the running time in lieu of the scenes edited for violent content. In addition to these three versions, there have been a handful of deleted scenes included on the Criterion home releases (namely, the DVD and Blu Ray releases).

On July 21st, 2008, a fan composite of the film was uploaded to the paracinema site with the following description:
“Now, to be totally honest, I haven't watched this, so I can't speak to exactly what is extra in it. From what I can tell, this was done a while ago and it's (nicely) edited together from the VHS release of the uncut version of the flick and an A&E TV broadcast. The official uncut release runs 89mins, this one runs 103mins. There's also a few minutes after the credits that I'm not sure are unique, but may be. So, basically, if anyone watches this through and posts here what all is different about the flick, I will happily update the torrent description…”

After a handful of comments thanking the uploader, the following was posted by a user:

“I can't recall the specifics right now, but the A&E version had at least 2 scenes (to cover run time for all of the edited gore and S&M) that were sadly not featured anywhere on the Criterion disc. Now that I think of it, one thing I can say for sure is that Max Wren's ruse in the homeless shelter goes on for about a minute longer and I think the scene in the optometry shop goes on longer. Repo Man got similar treatment on A&E, and some of those scenes ended up on the newer disc.”

This was followed by a comment from another user:

“…as i remember, this has quite a bit of extra stuff (mostly from the a&e edit) including the longer explanation of the development of the signal/helmet by barry convex, both versions of the car ride to spectacular optical (one with convex on the video, one with debbie harry) and a bunch of other new/alternate/extended
scenes, my favourite of which is when max catches his reflection in a window (i won't spoil it)…”

A comment was added by an unknown user⁶, remarking “Just to add one more thing... The reason this stuff isn't on the Criterion disc is because Cronenberg doesn't like the extra footage,” followed by the final comment that has been made, to date:

“BTW, when this movie originally played at cinemas, it was longer than the uncut VHS and DVD releases that came out afterward. It was a completely re-edited version that made it to home video, and that's pretty much the version that has been shown ever since. Except for the TV-Version, which edits out all the gore and nudity BUT adds more Debbie Harry!”

This contentious comment may or may not be true (in fact, all signs point to it being a foggy recollection), but it serves to illustrate one of the primary reasons individuals seek out this material. In fact, a post on the forums of Sci Flicks further reinforces this⁷. A user by the name of fajerdah posted on May 29th, 2007:

“This has been nagging me ever since I got across Videodrome. I'm trying to find the one and only original version of Videodrome, and I seem to have trouble finding which one is real...

Firstly, I watched Videodrome in about 1996-1998. But I was really young.

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⁶ The identity of this user is not known because the account has since been deleted
Now, I watched it from Netflix, a few weeks ago. So I thought that was the normal version. But I kept coming across these few pictures:

(pictures removed)

I thought I had a cut version so I rented the Criterion Edition. Same thing... And I have the vague feeling that the one I saw on TV in 1996-1998 had a lot more content to it. I seem to have a cut version. What version is the real one????”

The repeated references to the “real” version of the film seem to be correlating all deleted footage with a sense of value that their excision removes. Although the user on Sci Flicks makes reference to having a cut version, it is in actuality the preferred version of the director. While it may have a shorter run time than other versions that have been released over the years (although only in comparison to the television version), the footage that constituted the additional length was never intended to be in the final release of the film. The scenes added to the television version were done so merely to pad out the length, and likely were removed early in the editing process for pacing and other reasons known only to those involved in the editing process. The fact that they are now being referred to as “cut” footage is very interesting, considering they were never a part of the theatrical or home video release, and depending on how one views television versions, never a part of any official release of the film.

However, if we go back to the comment posted on the paracinema site referring to a mysteriously longer version of the film that played in the cinema, there exists (in a dubious form, but a nonetheless valid one in the form of hazy nostalgia) proof that this material is a part of some original, master version. It is precisely this hazy tracing of what
constitutes completeness that often makes fan composites nothing more than curiosities, brought on by nostalgic recollections of a false past memory. Their mish-mash nature of including everything, no matter what the artistic reasoning behind its exclusion, distances them from the intended vision of the production itself. The value to the fan community comes from the simple fact that they offer the chance to see more of a film, and in some cases, an alternate experience of the film via the inclusion of material that may expand or alter particular narrative arcs, but does not necessarily offer a better version.

One of the most remarkable things to come out of the site is the large assortment of films that have never been released with any form of English translation (either English-dubbed or subtitled) with fan-made English subtitles. Often these fan-made works are the only versions of films available to English-speaking viewers, giving a plethora of films an entirely new audience. There are roughly 721 uploads on the site that feature fan-made subtitles, with the majority of them being foreign films with English fansubs. Films from Brazil (A Dança dos Bonecos, Helvecio Ratton 1986), France (Canicule, Yves Boisset 1984, which is a mix of a 2.35:1 French source with English fansubs, a vast improvement over the North American English-dubbed 4:3 VHS), Turkey (Atesli Kizlar Kampta, Kadir Akgün 2000), and Sweden (Censuren - En thriller, 2011) all feature English subtitles created by users of the site, who have spent hours working for free simply to allow a new audience to experience these films. The films held on the site which have never been officially released outside of their respective territories, now with newly-created English fansubs, open up new potential for film studies and the general understanding of world cinema, especially useful “given that Anglophone scholarship on
national cinemas has been largely focused on films which have gained some form of international distribution and been subtitled in English” (Smith par. 5).

The A.I.P. Project

One of the larger features of the site is its Projects page, which houses a number of collective projects designed to compile a particular set of films. Joe D’Amato has his own project, designed to catalogue and archive all known films in which he had a hand, while Laura Gemser (of Emanuelle fame) has her own project as well. There are also themed projects, such as the Dystopian project, which catalogues all films set in a dystopian setting, or genre projects such as the Peplum project which covers as many Italian sword-and-sandal films as it can. The projects are purely collaborative efforts, put up on the site and its progress tracked publicly as films are uploaded and added, upgraded and refined upon, using a Wiki format to allow for multiple users to contribute.

Action International Pictures was a film production and distribution company started in 1986, which released Z-grade cinema almost exclusively directly to the home video market. Often utilizing the same cast and crew, noticeably jarring stock footage, and laughable special effects and dialogue, these films found their niche during the VHS heyday. As the box covers often featured artwork miles above the actual film’s quality, they were marketed to make a quick sale to video stores and satisfy the growing need for new films to fill video store shelves. The long-term value of these films was not considered, and many of them fall into the grey area between VHS and DVD, simply because what was a marginal profit fifteen years ago does not translate to the same
marginal profit today. The fact that the films are horribly dated examples of the 80’s VHS craze make them of interest mostly to collectors or fans of bad cinema, and starting a collection of these films (most of which are still only available on VHS) would be a rather large undertaking. Due to the cost of time and money tracking down used VHS tapes through online auctions and the few still-surviving mom-and-pop video stores that might have the films on their shelves (or in their sale bins), it is much easier to instead read a review online and write the films off as forgotten to time.

Trying to combat this, the site started a project simply titled “Action International Pictures”, with the goal to collect every single film that was released under the A.I.P. moniker. Some films are so rare that the only versions held on-site are less than optimal. For example, the 1993 film *A Walk With Death* (Ron Gorton Sr.), which was distributed by A.I.P. at some point in the USA, is only available in a version pulled from a German VHS tape, with German audio and no English subtitles. In fact, this film was the final remaining piece of the project before it was completed in November of 2011. It is highly likely that, given time, fan-made subtitles will be added, and the preservation of the film will be one step closer to its original US video release. Other films in the project have looser ties to A.I.P., such as *Killer Workout* (David A. Prior 1987), which was released on VHS through Academy Home Entertainment and produced by Shapiro Entertainment. Prior was one of the initial founders of A.I.P. and directed a larger number of A.I.P.’s output, and because of this the project extends to all films directed or written by Prior as well. In the case of *Killer Workout* (known as *Aerobicide* in the UK), there has never been an official DVD release in North American territories, so the PAL DVD was uploaded to the site, therefore the version found on-site has the opening credits of
“Aerobicide”, rather than “Killer Workout”. The site’s inclusion of IMDB entry numbers for each film makes it incredibly easy to verify a film that is listed under alternate titles, as clicking the IMDB number will take a user directly to the IMDB page for the film.

The output of A.I.P. was small enough that a complete archive could be created online in the span of only a few years, as a total of 47 films were distributed and 20 films were produced by A.I.P.. Films like *Alien Space Avenger* (Richard W. Haines 1989) and *Elves* (Jeffrey Mandel 1989) are only available by purchasing used copies on VHS, having long been out of print. These films assign true value to the A.I.P. project, by providing access to all A.I.P. films in a single location, even more so considering these are films that could (and would likely) be ignored by academic film archives. The typical argument of piracy destroying the ability for a film to earn revenue does not apply in the case of out-of-print VHS sources. Similar to the bootleg *Saturday Night Live* DVDs that were sold for large profit, these out of print films are also sold as DVD-dubs for profit. As there is no financial profit to be made from uploading films to the site, and there is no official release that is currently in-print, there is no harm that can come from a film’s inclusion to the site. The only people who will see a reduction in profits are those who should not be profiting in the first place.

The below chart provides a list of the asking price from second-hand retailers for out-of-print VHS-only A.I.P. films, which are all found on the site (prices current as of February 20, 2012):
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film Title</th>
<th>eBay</th>
<th>Amazon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elves (1989)</td>
<td>$34.70</td>
<td>$24.95-$98.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born Killer (Kimberley Casey 1990)</td>
<td>No copies</td>
<td>$8.99-$14.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Walk With Death (1993)</td>
<td>No copies</td>
<td>No copies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deadly Prey (David A. Prior 1987)</td>
<td>No copies</td>
<td>$44.95-$250.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Final Sanction (David A. Prior 1990)</td>
<td>$7.10</td>
<td>$4.17-$21.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mission...Kill (David Winters 1987)</td>
<td>No copies</td>
<td>$0.75-$23.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killer Workout (1986)</td>
<td>$30.63</td>
<td>$37.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bounty Hunter (Robert Ginty 1989)</td>
<td>$7.10</td>
<td>$1.99-$17.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killzone (David A. Prior 1985)</td>
<td>$5.05-$30.66</td>
<td>$5.64-$10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The P.A.C.K. (Bryan Todd 1997)</td>
<td>No copies</td>
<td>$20.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Snow (Frank Patterson 1989)</td>
<td>No copies</td>
<td>$9.95-$49.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order of the Eagle (Thomas Baldwin 1989)</td>
<td>No copies</td>
<td>$0.95-$19.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeboys (Lindsay Norgard 1992)</td>
<td>No copies</td>
<td>No copies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak of The Devil (Raphael Nussbaum 1991)</td>
<td>No copies</td>
<td>$4.88-$40.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffering Bastards (Bernard McWilliams 1989)</td>
<td>No copies</td>
<td>$1.49-$89.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presumed Guilty (Lawrence L. Simeone 1991)</td>
<td>No copies</td>
<td>$7.47-$19.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Pricing of VHS AIP Films

Taking into account the prices for these out of print films, the profits which go to individuals, none of which have a legitimate connection to the productions, one must ask whether it is more damaging to have someone make money from used VHS tapes, or to

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8 eBay prices are from “Buy It Now” listings, as auction prices can vary wildly until the auction closes
allow someone to share the film for free (and in the process, create a digital copy of the film that does not require a VCR to play). As collectible artifacts, physical items to be owned, they acquire value through the collectors’ own assumptive value they assign to their collections. For example, *Elves* is not commonly found for sale online, nor is it a particularly well known film, and it has a rather impressive box cover, therefore its high price tag can be seen as somewhat justified. But it is a price that reflects the value of the object, not the content, something of little comfort to the casual viewer wanting to merely view the film. With DVDs usurping VHS’s dominance, it is possible that VHS tapes will become increasingly expensive and rare, becoming less about the film they contain and more about their collectible appeal. As Kate Egan ponders at the end of her aforementioned study, “will the original (VHS) versions become even rarer and more historically authentic video objects…obtained in ever more intricate, time-consuming, and thus appealing and attractive ways?” (218). If this is the future for VHS, places such as the paracinema site will ensure that the films themselves remain accessible without restrictive prices of admission.
Almost Live!

During the 80s and 90s, a local sketch comedy show managed to bump *Saturday Night Live* back half an hour to midnight. The show, known as *Almost Live* (KING 1984), created and based out of local Seattle NBC affiliate station KING, has also managed to achieve the feat of still being the highest rated show in its time slot (now 1-2am on Saturday night/Sunday morning), even though the show’s run ended in 1999. Originally started as a sit-down talk show format with an in-house band, the show was changed for the 1989 season to sketch comedy, with the occasional stand-up or guest in the earlier seasons. The show focused almost exclusively on in-jokes and parodies of local events, figures and politicians, and would frequently poke fun at the various communities in the Pacific Northwest (including Vancouver). Because of this, the show was (and still is) a local fixture in the Seattle region, and managed to create a unique connection with the community that helped shape it (and allowed it to thrive for ten more seasons). The drawback, however, was that the humour was localized in extremis, and did not translate well to other communities. Attempts were made to repackage the show briefly, and a short run on Comedy Central was met with lacklustre results.

One example of the way the show was repackaged was the replacement of localized settings with generic American stereotypes. A sketch named “Cops in Ballard” (home of Seattle’s aging Scandinavian community) was retitled “Cops in Fargo, North Dakota”. The show’s opening monologue (similar to *Saturday Night Live*), which would feature a series of jokes poking fun at that week’s news in the Pacific Northwest area, was replaced with a series of broad (and less funny) jokes. This was the first attempt to market the show to a larger audience, and was a rather large failure. The second attempt
came when some of the show’s sketches were included in the short-lived show *Haywire* (FOX, 1990). Again, the show itself did not fare well, and no further attempts were made to air *Almost Live*, either in part or its entirety, outside of the Pacific Northwest market. Because of this, it is not surprising that the show has never been released on DVD or any other home format in recent years. It has, however, been airing continuously ever since its cancellation in 1999, now following *Saturday Night Live*.

Part of its appeal, for those who watched the show first-run, was its rather lucky circumstance of being a part of the Seattle scene during a time when the whole world was looking to Seattle as a cultural Mecca. Local bands like Soundgarden (whose guitarist Kim Thayil made appearances during the show’s “Lame List” segments) and Nirvana (whose drummer, Dave Grohl, made the occasional appearance on the show) were at the forefront of the popular Grunge movement, and Seattle was seen as the “it” place to be. Starbucks, Microsoft, and other iconic “Seattle” things were all targets of the show, whose audience members revelled in being able to laugh at what the rest of the country was holding up as examples of “hip” and “trendy”. Fatefully, the period during the show’s run (1989-1999) coincided with a period when the city “appeared within popular accounts as a city seemingly largely unscathed by the negative repercussions of the profound economic and social restructuring affecting other American cities” (Lyons 8). Because it was able to reference this largely naïve and idealized view of Seattle through comic sketches and ironic parodies, it appealed to the surrounding communities while not going so far as to alienate outsiders, and was able to mock its own community without anyone taking offense (at least, not in great amounts). The show also captured a time and

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9 There were a series of VHS releases during the show’s run, which were essentially “Best of” releases, sold locally, but nothing has been officially released since then.
place that no longer exists, an incarnation of Seattle that has changed since and is no
longer the same. “The city has lost its oddball manner and its regional distinction”, which
has muted much of what made the show unique, said cast member John Keister. Fellow
cast member Nancy Guppy agrees, and is not sure the show could even exist in current
times. “Everything is becoming more homogeneous, with condos stacked on Subways,
luxury markets…I’m not sure who cares about the local thing – the Seattle thing.” (qtd. in
Lewis).

The show’s most recognizable cast member, Keister, spoke on the possibility of
Almost Live receiving a DVD release in a November 7, 2007 blog interview for the
Seattle PI. His suggestion was for fans to set their TiVo to tape the show, and make their
own. This was in response to the then-head of KING’s marketing department stating that
the station had no plans to release the show on DVD, not now or in the future (Guzman).
While KING owns all of the rights to the show, there appears to be no animosity on the
part of the station towards fans making the show available online. With the station stating
that they have no interest in releasing the show on DVD, and the show’s own cast
member suggesting that fans create their own personal libraries from television tapings,
along with the dismal track record of the show’s release outside of the Pacific Northwest,
the show is one of the finest examples of why amateur archiving is sometimes the only
means of long-term preservation. Through fans taking the time and effort to record,
catalogue, and make available the material, the show has a guaranteed future beyond
reruns (which may end at any given time, at KING’s choosing).

I became interested in recording the show for my own personal collection around
2007. My initial interest was in keeping copies of the show, which I thought wouldn’t last
on the air a few more years tops. Originally aired at one episode a week, my collection
grew to quite a significant amount within a few years, and when KING began airing two
episodes a week (back to back late Saturday night), I realized I was seeing more episodes
I had already taped than new ones. Because of the size of my collection, I also needed to
devise some method of cataloguing what I was recording. The show poses a problem for
this, with no clear way to tell which episode is which, as there is no episode number
listed at the end of the show, and the format (see Table 4) makes it difficult to identify
individual episodes, as there is no guest host like SNL has.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Almost Live Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cold Open Sketch (a handful of episodes have no opening sketch)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening Credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monologue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sketches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The John Report (news report, similar to SNL’s Weekend Update, only almost exclusively focused on local events of the past week, featured Season 7 onwards)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sketch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cast joins Keister onstage, and Keister says good-night (with end credits following)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Almost Live format

I chose to note what the cold open sketch was for each episode I recorded, and
sorted this further using the year shown at the very end of each episode. What I ended up
with was a list broken down into years from 1989 to 1999, with anywhere between 5 to
26 episodes per year recorded. This method worked in almost all circumstances, except
for a small number of episodes which did not have a cold open sketch, but rather started
straight from the opening credit sequence (strangely, almost all of these instances
occurred between 1994 and 1995). In these cases, I made note of the lack of an opening
sketch, and then tried to pull a quoted sentence from the beginning of Keister’s
monologue. All things considered, this was a somewhat clumsy organization scheme, but it managed to leave only one unidentified episode out of over 100.\(^\text{10}\)

Once my own collection had come to a level that saw its growth slow to a crawl, I began to seek out places where my missing episodes might be found. The first place I looked was the IMDB message board for the show, which featured a healthy discussion and numerous threads. The user ramrod-8 made a series of postings detailing his own personal collection, listing the number of episodes they had recorded from each year. Early in 2009, they were kind enough to send me a PDF they had obtained listing the original air dates of every episode (presumably smuggled from the station at some point) which now functioned as a master episode list, minus any information that would allow someone to identify which episode was which (beyond the year listed at the end of the credits). This meant that in order to assemble an archive of the show and properly assign episode numbers, one would have to somehow ascertain when each episode aired and match it up with the airdate listing.

There was no easy way to do this, and I decided to use the opening monologue as the source of information that could identify each episode. The monologue was the one stable of the show, and it appeared in every single episode without fail, which made it a perfect source to use as an identifier (see Table 5 for examples of how this was done). This was an enormous task to undertake for the 258 episodes that aired between 1989 and 1999, but thankfully I was stopped after identifying the first handful of episodes.

\(^\text{10}\) This episode was undetermined because it had no year listed at the end of the credits, therefore it could have aired anywhere from 1989 to 1993/94, based off of the opening title sequence that aired only during those years.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode #</th>
<th>Process of Identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Season 6, Episode 1</td>
<td>During the monologue, Keister mentions it is the start of the season for the “New” Almost Live. The year listed at the end is 1989, and coupled with the remark that this is the first episode of the revamped version of the show leads to it being the first episode of Season 6 (aired 1989/1990, and the first season of the show’s run as a sketch-comedy format).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Season 6, Episode 2</td>
<td>During the monologue, Keister makes a joke about Army Rangers taking down gangsters in Tacoma, WA earlier in the week. I entered “1989 Army Rangers Tacoma” into Google, and found an article from The News Tribune identifying Sep 23, 1989 as the date of the occurrence. Therefore, this is episode 6x02, which aired on September 30, 1989.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Season 6, Episode 6</td>
<td>Keister says “…this is the weekend before Halloween…”, which would make this episode 6x06, which aired October 28, 1989 (the weekend before Halloween that year).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Season 6, Episode 8</td>
<td>Keister mentions “…today is Washington’s birthday…”, which would make it November 11. That day in 1989 saw episode 6x08 air.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Identification of Almost Live episodes

After I had identified eight episodes, I stumbled across a site that went by the name “George Buford’s Almost Live! Fansite”, a find I made entirely by accident when I was searching for information on an episode. Despite, at the time, being buried beyond the first couple of pages of Google results, the site was remarkable in that it featured a nearly complete episode guide, along with clips for each episode, comprising a nearly complete online archive. The site is run by another fan of the show, going by the name George

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12 Currently found at http://www.georgebuford.com
Buford (a pseudonym), and represents the most complete and expansive preservation of the show to date. George has also been recording episodes for years, however he has been recording in high-definition from KING’s HD feed. This means that there is little to no difference between his copies and the original master tapes, making his copies the best and most complete outside of the station itself. From these, he also identified each episode from the same exhausting process of deduction using Keister’s monologues, and broke each episode up into parts using the show’s formulaic breakdown as seen in Table 4. Buford typifies each segment as either “intro skit, opening credits, monologue, skit, news, goodbye”, and “closing credits”. On top of this, he fact-checked each guest star for sketches, so that the cast listing is complete, allowing anyone who had appeared in the show to find the sketch by simply searching his or her name. What resulted was an episode guide that listed each season, then each episode, and then each individual sketch and segment found therein. Similar to The SNL Archives, Buford’s site lists all cast members and special guests that appear in each segment. What sets Buford’s site apart from The SNL Archives (likely due to the low visibility and profit-making ability of the show) are the accompanying YouTube clips for each segment, viewable by clicking on a small YouTube logo found on each segment’s page. Not only is Buford’s site an online, searchable database for the show, but it is also an integrated digital archive connected to the database.

Naturally, I began to send Buford episodes he was missing that I happened to have, with which in time he will fill in the gaps, and within a matter of more time, complete the archive. From start to finish (whenever that may be), the site represents years of work for both Buford, myself (in a smaller context), and the IMDB user who was
so kind as to send me the airdate listing (which eventually found its way to Buford as well). The depth of cataloguing, as well as the ease by which individual sketches can be found, represent the best publicly available resource. Even the personal rundowns held (presumably) by the show’s crew would only be searchable by hand, as there would have been no practical reason to enter the information by-hand into a digital database. This brings about an amusing relationship that cast members of the show have with Buford. He remarks “anytime they want a copy of a sketch they did, they cannot get it from KING for legal reasons…This makes me the ‘go to’ man when one of them has a speaking engagement and wants to show their work.” It appears both the station and the show’s own director, Steve Wilson (who was also a cast member), have turned a blind eye to Buford’s site.

But the big question that all of this warrants is why individuals such as myself and Buford would spend countless hours, years even, recording and notating material which bring us no personal gain other than the enjoyment we get from the work itself. “After putting my first few videos online after the show ended I started being contacted by people who had moved out of state/country, or were serving our country overseas and no longer had access,” Buford notes.

“So it began by putting up pieces of the show I had recorded. But a friend I grew up with…suggested I “archive” the show, given my computer ability…it just seemed natural to do something that nobody had done – make an online website dedicated to the show. It was something that could be done in my “spare time”, and minimally interfere with ‘real life’.”
When asked about how Buford became interested in the show to begin with, he connected it with his own love of sketch comedy.

“I have had an interest in sketch comedy ever since I saw my first ‘Python’ marathon on PBS back in grade school. I had little interest in Shafer or the ‘talk show’ format when it was aired. But when they went ‘all sketch’, it was great because we had a comedy troupe that openly mocked the people and places around me.”

For myself, the show is simply nostalgia personified, tied to Keister and Guppy’s feelings on the city of Seattle itself. The show managed to capture a very special time, both for the area it was centred in, and for my own teenage life. Not only did the show’s location-shot sketches capture fixtures of Seattle that have since vanished (Buddy's Homesick Cafe at 85th and Greenwood, The Bonmarche, and others), its topical humour made each episode a miniature time-capsule of the era (helped by the bumper music that played before and after commercials, which was a selection of popular music of the time). Ironically, it is the bumper music that remains one of the largest stumbling blocks for any official release of full episodes, as the clearance rights for the music alone would make the costs prohibitive before consideration was even given to the small demographic the release would be aimed at. By re-watching episodes of the show, I am able to re-live a time, and re-visit a place in that time, as well as step back into my teenage “grunge” identity. The

13 He is referring to the first five seasons of the show hosted by Ross Shafer, which was a sit-down talk show format.
nostalgia involved in the process more than merits the time spent acquiring and sorting through episodes.

When I uploaded a handful of episodes to another private torrent site, one that caters almost exclusively to television programming that is no longer aired, they were met with comments such as “…brought back memories!”, with users commenting how they were born and raised in Washington and loved watching the show. Buford’s YouTube channel has a combined video-view total of 1,541,275, an astounding number for a show that failed to find success outside of its own regional niche. For Buford, it is about giving credit to incredibly talented individuals who created a unique sketch-comedy show that connected with the local community in a way few shows have done before, and preserving their work for others who are not currently in the Pacific Northwest (with television access), whether or not they have seen the show before. For both of us, it is about allowing others access to experience a program that was and still is a localized cultural phenomenon.
**Doctor Who and The Canadian Cat Puppet**

There is a unique motivator that exists amongst the amateur archiving community. There are those who take the time to gather and distribute material in the hopes that others can share in the joy they have experienced, be it from nostalgia or simply solid entertainment value, but driven by a fear that without their work to archive the material, it may become lost forever. Although motivations are rarely unselfish, there is a selfless aspect to the work of these individuals, driven first by the selfish interest to acquire material, but later negated when they take the time to organize and upload this same material for the public to access free of charge.

It may seem like an antiquated notion for film and television material to become “lost”, but the reality is that media has been lost in the past half-century through the same practices that saw episodes of The Tonight Show deleted permanently. When dealing with throwaway material such as news broadcasts and commercials, it is almost a given that the material will disappear from the public’s grasp within decades if not for home-made preservation attempts. It is when those off-air recordings become the subject of interest to those who once erased the master copies that the importance of off-air recordings is pushed into the spotlight. Perhaps the most widely researched example of this comes from the iconic show Doctor Who (BBC 1963), which was aired over a remarkable span of twenty-six years (not including the relaunched series, which is about to begin its seventh series late 2012).

The show features a unique plot device that sees The Doctor regenerate his body when mortally wounded, resulting in a new actor taking the role each time The Doctor regenerates. Starting in 1963 when the show began, the first three doctors were played by
William Hartnell, Patrick Troughton and Jon Pertwee in chronological order ending in 1974 with the introduction of Tom Baker as the fourth incarnation of The Doctor. It is the first three doctors’ episodes that have suffered from the wiping of material, most significantly Troughton’s reign. There is no study that has been more thorough than Richard Molesworth’s book *Wiped: Doctor Who’s Missing Episodes*, which covers in great detail the efforts to locate the missing episodes, and the situation that led to their erasure in the first place. Like most other cases of tape wiping, *Doctor Who*’s tapes were erased due to a combination of tape cost and storage space along with a lack of foresight to the coming importance of reruns and syndication. While some early episodes were rebroadcast months after its initial transmission, there was nothing akin to the modern practice of airing repeats to fill out a broadcast pattern that remains the same year-long.

An example of contractual issues stemming from the burden of renegotiation, similar to the current issue facing television programming from the era before home releases were commonplace, the incidences of junking at the BBC were directly related to the contracts between the BBC and the artist unions, which allowed for a first showing and one repeat showing within the span of two years. Any other repeat showings beyond the two year period required the BBC to renegotiate with every single artist involved in the production, a task that would understandably be a large undertaking. This, combined with the limited storage space in archives at the time, led to the BBC’s need to junk film canisters and re-use tape wherever possible, keeping only the most important material that was of historic and cultural significance. This was brought to the public’s attention in an article by Nicholas Wapshott in the Scotsman on August 21, 1975 (in Molesworth, 135-36), one of the first mentions of the practice in the media, and within a short period
of time the BBC began to reverse its practices and, for the most part, stop wiping its programming.

With the BBC’s creation of an Archive Selector in the mid-70s, a position first held by Sue Malden, there was now a clearly defined process to preserve material from that point forward. As Malden commented,

“(there was a) process and procedure of saying why something had been selected, and introduced a set of criteria. So you’d say ‘This was kept for…criterion A, B or C…’ or whatever, so that at least people in the future could know what was on your mind when you decided what should be kept.” (in Molesworth, 139).

As years went by and it became clear what episodes were and were not held in the BBC’s archives, a movement began to track down the missing pieces. As was the standard practice, the BBC sold episodes of the show to overseas broadcasters for their own airings, and when the station was through with the tapes, they would be required to send them back to the BBC (or in some cases, send them onward to another overseas broadcaster who would then air it themselves). One thought was that perhaps some of these tapes had not been returned, or had been misplaced during the process and that some of the missing episodes might be found through tracing the shipping patterns of foreign-bound copies.

Even though the CBC purchased early episodes for broadcast in Canada, none of them were still in their hands when the search began. After the broadcast of the first
doctor’s initial adventures, no more *Doctor Who* was broadcast in Canada for over a
decade, until in 1976 the local Vancouver station CKVU purchased an assortment of the
third doctor’s adventures (at this point being filmed and aired in color). These episodes
were re-aired until 1982, when CKVU’s rights expired and the tapes were returned to the
BBC’s Toronto offices, and at that point were some of the only surviving broadcast-
standard color copies of a handful of episodes (Molesworth, 355-6).

More interesting were the episodes found in the hands of private collectors,
usually fans of the show who had circulated copies. Even more interesting, and perhaps
unique in that few other shows have made use of such constructions (or rather, spent the
time and effort to create such reconstructions), are the off-air audio recordings made by
viewers in the 1960s, which combined with amateur 8mm footage and photographs taken
of the television screen, constitute the only remaining pieces of certain episodes. One
such fan, a man by the name of Richard Landen, spent countless hours diligently
recording the audio of *Who* episodes during the period of 1965 to 1978 (during which
period he never missed a single episode). Initially interested in recording the audio on a
reel-to-reel recorder so that he could better transcribe the episodes for his own personal
collection (in order to “relive” the episodes that he had seen), once he began recording
the audio of episodes, his transcriptions turned into detailed sketches of scenes and
scenery on-screen instead.

The incredible lengths Landen went to in order to ensure he never missed an
episode were truly astonishing. Once, when a miner’s strike caused power cuts through
the nation, he went out and purchased a portable tape recorder along with a Russian-
model television, for which he used a car battery to power both. As the power cut began
ten minutes into the episode of *Doctor Who*, he would record the first ten minutes inside, and then record the rest out in his car (Molesworth, 292). When Landen joined the Doctor Who Appreciation Society in its early days, he was more than happy to circulate his recordings amongst the fans. However, technology being limited in those days, each copy that was made suffered a drop in quality, with third and fourth generation dupes being quite terrible. Landen’s audio recordings remained the only existing record of many early episodes until other off-air recordings of higher quality were discovered. Graham Strong, another fan who recorded the show as a teenager, made recordings of such high quality that they were used by the BBC to create a series of soundtrack CDs (and the BBC were even kind enough to return his reels to him, and credit him on the liner notes of the release).

Strong’s recordings, and the efforts he made to get them noticed at the BBC, demonstrate a large gap in traditional archiving practices, brought upon by the patchwork method that is sometimes the only means of preserving media. The BBC were initially unsure about Strong’s tapes, as they fell between two areas of archiving. First, it was a soundtrack, which meant that the Film and Videotape Library had no great interest, as they did not store soundtracks to shows that they did not also hold the image tracks for. On the other hand, the BBC Sound Archive primarily held copies of radio programs, so the soundtrack to a television broadcast fell out of their area as well. Strong was able to convince the BBC that, if the image tracks for the missing episodes were ever to be discovered and they did not contain a soundtrack (or contained a foreign dubbed track), his audio recordings would be pivotal in the restoration of the complete episodes (Molesworth, 297).
The climate that saw Doctor Who erased en-masse might seem like a different time and place entirely, with digital storage nearly limitless in its ever-increasing capacities. However, the list of programming that has come and gone over the years is also seemingly endless, generally with a much less fervent fan base to seek out and reclaim the material. When programming was the product of network affiliate stations, locally shot and produced (a trend that has all but disappeared), there is even less assurance that material will survive the ages. With less redundancy than large network archives, small stations are sometimes the only place material is kept, which can lead to devastating losses such as the fire that swept through CJOH’s studios in Ottawa during February 2010. The fire destroyed close to four decades worth of footage from the station’s news archives, much of which can be found nowhere else, destroying not only priceless media but also a piece of the city’s historical visual record (Veillette par. 7).

According to an internet rumour that has spread from an unknown source (although a comment from the user laking13 on a short YouTube clip claims it was mentioned in a Toronto Star article from the late 2000’s, which I was unable to locate), the much decried Canadian low-budget sitcom The Trouble With Tracy (CTV 1971) had its master tapes erased by CFTO, the CTV affiliate where the show was shot. Widely heralded as the worst show ever broadcast, it is unclear whether or not it has managed to survive into the modern era. Tracing the internet rumour mill, an IMDB message board post by the user 74205 claims that a friend worked for CFTO, and that the master tapes were converted to Beta (which could be where the claim of master tapes being wiped comes from, if in fact they were wiped after copies had been made). The show, which used a German laugh-track machine, revamped American scripts from the 40’s and 50’s,
and a mock New York setting to disguise its Toronto studio locale, is a “perfect metaphor for early 70’s Canadian culture”, made even more so by its profound failure (Kenter 187). From a cultural perspective, the show represents a part of the Canadian climate during a time when Canadian television was still generally Canadian made and produced, but also is an early example of an American/Canadian co-production that tried to conceal its Canadian roots. It was, for a brief period, the most successful Canadian television export of all time (Kenter 186). That it has seemingly disappeared (with no television airings, and only the show’s opening and a small clip available online) seems a great loss.

Another internet rumour revolves around the children’s show *Putnam’s Prairie Emporium* (CTV 1988), a locally produced award winning show out of the CTV affiliate station CKCK in Regina, Saskatchewan. Originally aired on CTV between 1988 and 1990, and later aired in syndication on the Canadian channel YTV during the early 90s, a single post on the site X-Entertainment by a user named “Putnam’s Daddy” claiming to be the writer, director and producer of the show (ostensibly Bruce Edwards) sparked a short discussion between fans. Edwards (if to be believed) posted the following comment on November 27, 2003:

> “Just wanted to say how amazed I am that anyone, Maxx, Toilet Duck Fan and E! included, remembers Putnam’s Prairie Emporium, let alone the lyrics to the theme song!! I created, produced and directed that show and the cat puppet is at this moment staring down at me from a nearby shelf wondering if he’s ever going to work again!! Thanks to all for the comments and the interest!”

14 http://x-entertainment.com/updates/2003/05/22/thursday-morning-picture-party/comment-page-4/#comments
This led to a post from a user going by the name of “Puttnam’s Lyrics Writer” (perhaps the show’s composer Rob Bryanton) on June 30, 2004:

“To E! (and with a special shout out to Puttnam’s Daddy – Hey B!)…that’s amazing. I WROTE the freaking lyrics to that theme song and I don’t remember them that well. :) Guess my brain is too busy remembering the theme song to the Hilarious House of Frightenstein, instead. But good to know that a little piece of my past is still out there surviving …like a antibiotic-resistant germ. :) Oh, and as for the question of copies of Puttnam’s, I believe – and I think Puttnam’s Daddy will concur – that the master tapes of the show were toasted years ago (due to the foresight and wisdom of CTV executives, long may they wave). Perhaps some private copies exist somewhere. I think I still have my Caldicot Cat doll around here somewhere… Cheers!”

Just under three years later, the user referenced in both posts, going by the name of E! on the X-Entertainment site and by the name misterspiffy on his YouTube page, uploaded a full episode of the show to his YouTube channel. This was the first time in roughly a decade that the show had been seen by the general public (YTV ceased airing the show in the mid 90s, and it was not aired elsewhere after that). The video was later taken down by YouTube for a Terms of Use violation, and as of this writing his entire channel has been deleted for repeated Terms of Use violations. Currently there are a handful of clips to be

15 http://x-entertainment.com/updates/2003/05/22/thursday-morning-picture-party/comment-page-5/#comments
found on YouTube, with one full episode and one full clip show along with the opening moments of a third episode. No one has been able to provide me with an official answer as to whether or not the master tapes for the show still exist, in any form, in any archive either public or private.

The credibility of the aforementioned posts questionable, it is likely that, if shows of this nature and calibre still exist in station archives, they are most certainly a low priority and unlikely to have attention given to ensure the tapes do not degrade with time. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has forecast that by 2015, 80% of the 200 million hours of the world’s television and radio is doomed to disappear (in White 26). Simply leaving large archives of tape media in their original format is also a death clock countdown, waiting for the tapes to deteriorate beyond use, but digitizing material is an expensive process when the value of the task is not clearly understood. In the UK, the British Film Institute holds a yearly festival named “Missing Believed Wiped”, where it screens recently recovered material that was previously believed to have been wiped or lost. With a high visibility amongst the public, including ads for the annual events, the act of acquiring and sharing lost media is a much celebrated activity across the waters, and its treatment of private collecting and archiving as an integral part of media preservation lends credence to the importance of the efforts made by fans and amateur archivists. Speaking on some of the material that the festival has helped relocate, the BFI’s TV programmer Dick Fiddy mentions, amongst numerous other things, an entire collection of TV trailers from the BBC during the 1960s. He remarks, "That…nitty gritty of television – the continuity shorts, the flotsam and jetsam between the programmes – are the sort of thing that don't usually survive…it gives you a
much better idea of what Sixties television actually looked like” (qtd. in Gilbert). Fiddy’s comment leads to a final observation of amateur archiving, and a look at another group of archivists working to preserve just that: the nitty gritty of television, which rarely survives.
Temporal Affective Disorder

Similar to the uploading of entire programming blocks found on the nostalgia site, which preserve television as it originally was broadcast, there are also a large number of uploads to YouTube (and, in a smaller amount and likely redundant fashion, other streaming video sites) that contain nothing but the filler, the pieces of glue that held together various broadcasts, including commercials, bumpers, promos, newsbreaks and community flyers. It is this material that has become increasingly difficult to view, in part due to its throwaway nature and limited appeal after-the-fact, and in part due to the delay in widespread use of streaming video and online storage. While the VCR saw heavy use in most homes until the early 2000’s, it was not until the middle of the century that efficient and streamlined digital video became an integral part of the internet (in large part thanks to the introduction of YouTube in 2005). During that gap, the transition from VHS to DVD occurred, during which many homes cleaned out their VHS collections and sent them off to the local garbage dump, reasoning that DVD would make them obsolete (which, for the most part, was true). Amidst the sea of factory-recorded tapes (which rarely have value in the wake of a DVD release) were home-recorded tapes, some of which had been in rotational use since the 80s. The repeated recording and re-recording on a single tape created a temporal tapestry of off-air recordings, which made their discarding all the more tragic.

In 2006, most video rental stores (may they soon all rest in peace) had already cleared out their VHS stock and converted to an all-DVD model. YouTube had become popular, but featured very little in the way of nostalgic retro media. At the same time, a Toronto YouTube user by the name of Ed Conroy was seeking out old VHS tapes around
the Ontario region, after finding a large amount of 80s TV tapings at a local garage sale. Also at the same time, I had stumbled upon my in-laws’ collection of VHS tapes while spending a weekend house sitting. Having run out of things to occupy my time, I decided to go through the stacks of cryptically labelled tapes to see what they held. To my amazement, there was an assortment of television from the mid-80s, intact and unedited. After seeing some of this material, much of which is the only publicly viewable record of station news broadcasts, I felt a compulsion to seek out more tapes, motivated by the knowledge that although worthless to most, the material on these tapes may well be the only surviving copies of broadcast history (along with a very healthy dose of nostalgia).

As both myself and Conroy discovered, it was the end of tapes that often featured the most valuable and useful material, owing to the practice of re-recording over tapes, combined with the practice of leaving a tape recording until the very end. As summed up by Conroy:

“Accidentally recorded, at the end of a tape, buried treasure. Someone stayed up watching the late movie, trying desperately to edit out the commercials, only to fall asleep on the couch and end up with a recording of the nightly news and channel sign-off.”

And it was this exact circumstance that led to the first broadcasts I viewed on those VHS tapes I found in 2006. At some point, someone had recorded a movie and stopped recording when the film was done. This created a break in the playback, and beneath that was an older recording of television from December 23, 1986, which now began at the

16 http://www.retrontario.com/about/
very end of closing credits for some mystery program, after which followed a complete news broadcast from the Seattle CBS affiliate KIRO. This existed on the tape as presumably someone had started recording the prior program and had failed to come back and stop the tape (or had, perhaps, fallen asleep). Because the value is subjective, and because most people are not meticulous enough to know the exact recording lineage of each VHS tape in their collection, it is also a gold-rush scenario, substituting panning with scanning of tapes. The only means to obtain more footage is to acquire large collections of old tapes bound for the garbage, and sit patiently while they are scanned for suitable footage. Visits to thrift stores while passing through small towns has become a rather lucrative method of obtaining tapes, while large cities have seen an apparent depletion as of late (something Conroy and others have commented on during discussions).

With the beginning of Conroy’s YouTube page in 2008 (going by the name retrontario), which now holds over 2,000 uploads, an entire network of localized retro programming grew on the site, with retrowinnipeg, retrowindsor, and my own retrovancouver filling a nation-wide network preserving the odds and ends of television from times forgotten. In addition to this, there are numerous (too many to list) other channels on the site dedicated to old commercials from the past three decades (most focusing on 80s and 90s), including the Vancouver-based channel robatsea2009, which not only contains a plethora of vintage local broadcasts (including the previously mentioned Tonight Show clips) but also a large collection of station sign-on and sign-offs, and station IDs. Granted, these are all likely held in some fashion at the station themselves, but the odds of the general public being allowed to walk in and peruse their
archives, let alone access them from a computer anywhere in the world, are slim. In a strange coincidence, TVOntario, the station of which many of retrontario’s uploads are sourced from, recently launched an online site that showcases a selection of its archives. Opened to the public on February 22, 2011, the site (found at archive.tvo.org) features a unique cross-section of the station’s output over its entire lifespan, featuring full episodes of programs that have not been seen in decades. Quite comprehensive, and more importantly publically accessible, TVO’s archival site is a shining example of what can, and should be done by more stations.

TVO’s online archive was not without it costs, however. Requiring around $30,000 in residuals for the first year of its existence (Taylor par. 12), the prospect of funding such sites can be difficult when budgets are tight. The material I have looked at, from commercials to television programs, tends to be highly localized in terms of viewer demographics, as further demonstrated through statistics derived from my YouTube channel, retrovancouver. Much like Almost Live, which has seemingly little viewer interest outside of those currently or formerly living in the Pacific Northwest, the uploads from regional retro channels seem to appeal only to those within the same region the material originally aired in. Table 6 lists a cross-section of uploads from retrovancouver, and the viewing statistics for each during the period of Jan 16, 2012 – Feb 14, 2012:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video Title</th>
<th>Location and Number of Views</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BCTV Commercials and Promos (Xmas 1989) – Vancouver channel</td>
<td>Canada 68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United States 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Philippines 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Romania 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hong Kong 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United Kingdom 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video Title</td>
<td>Location and Number of Views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TBS Commercials and Promos (Xmas 1993) – Atlanta channel</td>
<td>United States 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canada 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Russia 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chile 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saudi Arabia 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mexico 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KVOS Christmas Commercials Dec 1990 Part 2 / BCTV Christmas Commercials</td>
<td>Canada 46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996 Part 1 – Bellingham/Vancouver channels</td>
<td>United States 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australia 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Philippines 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Germany 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New Zealand 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United Kingdom 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBC Promos and Commercials (1994) – Vancouver channel</td>
<td>United States 46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canada 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Philippines 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United Kingdom 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIRO 7 News, December 23, 1986 - Part 2 – Seattle channel</td>
<td>United States 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canada 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New Zealand 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Italy 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: retrovancouver Statistics

It seems that those who may have viewed the content when it originally aired, or could have feasibly imagined themselves viewing it when it originally aired, represent the majority of viewers. The strong correlation between the station’s locale and the origin of the viewer seems to suggest this, best illustrated by the TBS upload. TBS, an Atlanta based superstation that aired nationwide in both the US and Canada, has an almost entirely US-based viewership for its upload. The difference between the two countries, despite the channel being available in both regions, is the fact that in Canada it was offered as a pay-TV premium service for the majority of the 90s, therefore it stands to reason that most of those who grew up in Canada did not have this channel available to them. This seems to explain the almost total absence of Canadian viewers for the TBS
commercial block, and the almost exclusively American viewership. Also, the KVOS/BCTV upload has a near split viewership between the US and Canada, in part due to the two countries being represented in respective channels, but also due to the fact that KVOS was (at the time) based out of both Vancouver and Bellingham, and catered to both communities.

Despite somewhat different upload practices, retrontario, retrovancouver and another YouTube channel by the name of 80sCommercialVault feature rather complex detailed notation and date stamping. Although I modeled my own channel after 80sCommercialVault, retrontario takes the time to separate each piece of media into its own upload. Therefore, a single commercial will form a single upload, often no more than 15 or 30 seconds in length, titled with the product being advertised or the program from which the clip is taken, and if possible, the year it was broadcast and the station it was broadcast on. My own channel, along with the 80sCommercialVault page, sorts uploads into chunks of material based on its source, and instead notates each individual commercial, bumper, or other piece of footage with as much detail as possible, including any future celebrities in early roles or celebrity endorsements. This allows someone to search for a commercial by product name, year, and even possibly actors involved.

But why the relatively recent surge in retro preservation? For Tyler Goodison, another YouTube user with a retro-based channel, it’s a combination of nostalgia and a fascination with the evolution of marketing techniques. “Visual and audio bits get embedded into our minds,” he says, adding further
“My wife growing up as a young child in the 80s thought ‘batteries not included’ or ‘each sold separately’ were both long words (easolseprity & batreesnotinkuded) and did not actually know what they meant but knew they were the words used to end commercials.”

There is also the simple appeal of nostalgia, and a longing to return to a simpler time, perhaps a better time. “For myself, the essence of the 80s were captured in broadcast television and I can not help (but) think wouldn't it be nice to go back…The closest to time traveling back to the past is to see these old advertisements…”. Goodison refers to Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris* (2011), when he recants a line spoken by one of the film’s characters:

"Nostalgia is denial - denial of the painful present… the name for this denial is golden age thinking - the erroneous notion that a different time period is better than the one one’s living in - its a flaw in the romantic imagination of those people who find it difficult to cope with the present"

The individual behind the YouTube page robatsea2009 also muses that his uploads “…are little snapshots in time, ones in which the viewers might watch and within their minds shuttle back to that point in their life when they first saw it.”

I posed the question of “why download retro program blocks?” to the nostalgia site’s users, both in a forum and an online poll. As seen in the below results, the majority
of those who voted align the viewing of the blocks with a relived experience, in this case their childhood memories.

“I download retro program blocks from (site name)…”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To relive my childhood through old TV</td>
<td>137 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just to archive and watch later</td>
<td>93 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicken butt</td>
<td>54 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So I can watch it, then delete it</td>
<td>22 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ll post my own reason why in the forum</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Nostalgia Site Survey

Those who chose to provide more lengthy responses on the site’s forum merely expounded upon the same thing. One user spoke on the love of re-watching Saturday morning cartoon blocks:

“I was there. I sat through all that stuff when it was new and I was young, and it's just fun to go back and look at it again. Maybe if I have kids someday, they might enjoy sitting with Dad and watching an hour or two of TV the way I saw it growing it up.”

Another user remarked: “There is some element of nostalgia for me, particularly in seeing things that I didn't realize I remembered until I see them again. Interesting phenomena, that.” The same user commented on the sad reality of how nothing will likely ever fall into the public domain again, in light of the never ending copyright extensions that have altered copyright law drastically. With that said, the affordable public domain releases of 50’s television programming will never see its generational equivalent in 80s programming, even decades from now. One user summed it up quite nicely:
“Let's face it - in 100 years most of these petty copyright arguments are not going to matter when it comes to whatever material is available at present. As a community, we have a chance (and dare I say a duty) to preserve this material for the future as it actually was, not as the current copyright holders want it to be, before it's lost forever.”

On another private torrent site, devoted solely to television, a similar question was posited to the users. One comment stood out in regards to how commercials can offer something beyond the programs they were aired with:

“I like to preserve commercials for the same reasons I like to preserve any motion pictures, books, magazines, you name it - they tell something about the lifestyles and beliefs of the people who lived then. TV shows and movies tend to present a sanitized version of the culture they're made in, even when the people making them claim to be rebels. (Although, actually, what people thought constituted rebellion at the time tells you quite a bit about the culture too.) The commercials sanitize as well, but they tell you some things you don't get in the shows and movies. They give you another angle, as it were.”

In addition, another user honestly spoke about the nostalgic attachment to the material:
“I have a weird need to return psychically to my childhood years when I didn't have a care in the world. I guess you could call it nostalgia, but I think it goes deeper: I occasionally have these urges to go on a bender where I watch the TV shows, play the video games, and listen to the music from one specific year, or an even more limited time frame such as a specific season or even month.”

It is funny how the more things change, the more they stay the same. A 1990 study by Julia R. Dobrow on the motivation and reasoning behind repeated viewings of programming recorded on VCRs elicited almost identical responses to the ones I received. Several interviewees mentioned that having a program or film on VHS meant they held something tangible and permanent, with comments such as “Our wedding has been recorded forever – years from now we can watch it, or our kids can watch it, and it’s still there” and “The world is uncertain – you need to know that that movie (that’s so important to you) is still there, and you can see it again and again” (Dobrow 190). Dobrow found that many viewers chose to re-view old programs because “in their dated, unchanging dialogue and styles” they reminded them of simpler times (191). But the connection that Dobrow briefly discusses, which has a stronger importance now than perhaps when her study was done, is the ritualized nature of television viewing, especially when we are looking at the habits of children (such as Saturday morning cartoons and afterschool programming, both rituals that have greatly diminished in recent years). In many respects, the repeated ritualistic viewing of television functions similarly to the storytelling practices of parents or tribal elders, and my assertion is that when stripped of messages regarding cultural norms and the status quo, the nostalgia attached
to the re-viewing of television is a means of reclaiming one’s past memories (and by sharing the material with others, allowing the “experience” to be retold).

When viewing a news piece from one’s younger years, or experiencing the moment of recognition when a commercial jingle buried in the subconscious triggers a wave of memories to come flooding in, media works as a means to compare our current lives with the way we once were. “The world recalled may never have existed in quite the way it is remembered…(but) if a situation comedy brings back happy memories, even false happy memories, the effect on the psyche is the same” (Saltzman).
Conclusion

For some, reliving the past can conjure up memories of a better time and place. For others, it can be a painful reminder of things best left forgotten. Memories of the past can be troublesome, “(creeping) up to remind us of their existence and of the influence they wield on the present” (Acland xiii). But like them or not, they are ingrained in the present in ways which we may never be fully aware of. From car commercials that make sexist jabs at the danger of women drivers, to toy commercials that very poorly mask their blatant marketing techniques, to pieces of television history that take one back to yesteryear, media has become one of the most important and relevant figures of our recent past, evidenced by the propensity it has on the drive of individuals to preserve as much of it as possible.

Through the countless hours spent reviewing discarded VHS tapes, looking for any “buried treasure” that has survived, the obsolescent is finding a home amongst those who see its value, and will make sure it is not forgotten to time. While sites such as YouTube house thousands of hours of retro footage uploaded by users, it exists in a tenuous state, always looming on the edge of takedown yet surviving because of its uncertain status regarding copyright. It is this uncertain fate that has driven many to the underground torrent sites, two of which I have covered extensively through case studies. Their vast size outmatched only by the rarity of the material they house, they choose to remain in the shadows in the hopes that the work will not be for naught, and that the experiences their materials provide help to maintain a strong connection to the past. The irony is clearly visible, using complex current technology to convert, edit and preserve digital versions of analog media, as a means to celebrate analog content.
But I have just gleaned the surface of what these internet communities offer, in terms of understanding the connection retro media has to our current mode of media consumption. For one, sites such as the paracinema site seek to replicate a time when video stores were a staple of every community, when the mandatory trip to “return some videos” was a part of our weekly routine. With the shift towards on-demand digital streaming, and the related closure of most brick-and-mortar video stores over the past year, the question becomes whether or not we are facing a gain or a loss to the experience of viewing films. The video store crafted an important relationship with first-run films, by providing viewers with a framework of prior films upon which to base an understanding of current cinema, through their catalog of films available to rent. Initially, during the 1980s, the first-run film industry was dominated by teenage audiences, although the influx of video stores and the growing catalog of titles available within them led to a shift, whereby more older audiences were returning to the first-run cinemas, having reacquainted themselves with the films and their stars via the videocassettes they had rented. While not exclusive to the format entirely, “videocassettes solidify the process by which older films enhance the readability and public resonance of those that come after them” (Straw 6). With the loss of video stores as a ritualistic place to go, and the generational divide in digital literacy, we may be facing another shift in the habits and demographics of first-run moviegoers (or perhaps we have already experienced it). Sites such as the paracinema site, while providing access to the same breadth of material found in the largest of video stores, come with the requirement of being both computer literate at an intermediate level and, more recently, having an invitation to the site itself.
I grew up with the video store as my primary means of accessing film, but now I can access far more than I could have in even the largest of video stores, simply by visiting a single site. How is the current generation, who are savvy to the ways of the internet and no doubt access large torrent databases for their media consumption, being shaped by this shift and how does this influence their viewing behaviour? “The internet, like the video store, is about abundance, but it is also about the inertial movements that bring commodities and images together into clusters and networks whose solidity decides their cultural and symbolic weight” (Straw 14). With the need for sites to remain underground and thereby perpetuating their niche status (such as the two I have used as case studies), the content held within them will have a hard time obtaining the cultural weight that would assess their importance, and may keep them relegated to niche communities. On the other hand, commercials and other televisual debris is of less concern to copyright enforcers, and has managed to thrive in the public sphere on sites such as YouTube, garnering millions of combined views and increasing both its cultural and symbolic relevance.

The question becomes one of both copyright and culture-rights. Does a culture have a right to reclaim or preserve material as a countermeasure to the stockpiling and removal of material from the public’s access? Clearly, seen through the various case studies I have looked at, the public feels there is a great deal of material that is not being given the attention it deserves. With a show like Almost Live, which captured a piece of Seattle’s cultural history, the preservation ensures that the city’s own memories are preserved in the process. With alternate versions of films, such as Superman and countless other television versions, amateur preservation efforts ensure that media which
falls outside of profitable and marketable boundaries has a home, and is saved from eventual disappearance.

And how does one measure the financial value of nostalgic memories? Large amounts of programming might appear, on paper, unworthy of the time and costs involved in official online archives, despite the priceless emotional value. It is the need to relive, re-experience and revisit one’s own past that has driven a community to reclaim this material, and preserve it through unofficial channels. Whether it be a bygone aesthetic of 8mm film, a weekday afternoon afterschool ritual, or the feeling of walking through a video store littered with forgettable titles, amateur archiving on the internet is ensuring that our past remains accessible to the future. Illegal, thanks to draconian copyright law, these archives are mostly forced underground, where only those “in the know” can benefit from the preservation efforts. Perhaps, as attention is given to the value inherent within the material archived on sites such as the ones I have discussed, these archives will be seen as beneficial, rather than harmful. Offering uniquely different forms of film and television programming, which can co-exist alongside official releases with little to no significant harm to profits, they are too important to the society they represent to be kept as an underground niche. As one of Dobrow’s study respondents put it, “I like to watch things more than once because it reassures me that that little part of the world is still there, just like that – it doesn’t change, and it won’t ever” (191).
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