RETROMANIA

Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past

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Faber and Faber, Inc.

An affiliate of Farrar, Straus and Giroux

New York

Faber and Faber, Inc.
An affiliate of Farrar, Straus and Giroux
18 West 18th Street, New York 10011

Distributed in Canada by D&M Publishers, Inc.
Printed in the United States of America
Originally published in 2011 by Faber and Faber Ltd., Great Britain
Published in the United States by Faber and Faber, Inc.
First American edition, 2011

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011930771
ISBN: 978-0-86547-994-4

www.fsgbooks.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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TOTAL RECALL

Music and Memory in the Time of YouTube

Sometimes I think our culture has succumbed to Chris Farley Syndrome. That's the name of both a character in a regular sketch they used to do on *Saturday Night Live* and the now deceased comedian who played the role. A young man who presents a cable TV talk show out of his own living room, 'Chris Farley' has bizarrely good luck getting interviews with really famous stars (i.e. the weekly guest hosts on *SNL*). In a typical sketch, a celebrity such as Paul McCartney would sit politely on Farley's sofa, while the bumbling amateur interviewer, flustered and visibly dripping sweat, stammered his way through a series of inane questions, invariably starting with: 'D'ya remember . . .' So in Macca's case, this took the form of 'D'ya remember, Paul . . . d'ya remember "Eleanor Rigby"?' To which Macca would reply, with just the faintest hint of bemusement, 'Why yes, Chris, I *do* remember "Eleanor Rigby".' Farley then would blurt, ''Cos that was . . . that was . . . so . . . *cool*.' Then, suddenly realising his own vacuity, he'd start slapping his own forehead and berating himself: 'Idiot, IDIOT.' Only to do it again. And again.

All those *I Love the [Decade]* programmes were chronic cases of Chris Farley Syndrome. Most of the guest commentators did barely more than parrot the catchphrase/song lyric/advertising

slogan under consideration or emit some variant of 'That was . . . so . . . *cool*.' But the true metastasis of Chris Farley Syndrome must be YouTube's indiscriminate chaos of amateur cultural salvage.

YouTube's ever-proliferating labyrinth of collective recollection is a prime example of the crisis of overdocumentation triggered by digital technology. When cultural data is dematerialised, our capacity to store, sort and access it is vastly increased and enhanced. The compression of text, images and audio means that issues of space and cost no longer deter us from keeping anything and everything that seems remotely interesting or amusing. Advances in user-friendly technology (the scanner, the domestic video recorder, the mobile-phone camera) make it irresistibly quick and convenient to share stuff: photographs, songs and mixtapes, excerpts from television, vintage magazines, book illustrations and covers, period graphics, you name it. And once it's up on the Web, a lot of it stays out there, for ever.

A profound shift has taken place in which YouTube serves as both major player and potent symbol: the astronomic expansion of humanity's resources of memory. We have available to us, as individuals, but also at the level of civilisation, immensely more 'space' to fill with memorabilia, documentation, recordings, every kind of archival trace of our existence. And naturally, we are busily filling that space, even as its capacity continues to balloon. Yet there is no evidence that we have significantly increased our ability to process or make good use of all that memory.

Writing about the 'memory epidemic' that's gripped the developed world in the last couple of decades, Andreas Huyssen asked plaintively, 'Total recall seems to be the goal. Is this an archivist's fantasy gone mad?' But what's really significant isn't so much the 'total recall' as the instant access that the Web's cultural databases make possible. In the pre-Internet era, there was already way more information and culture than any individual could digest. But most of this culture data and culture matter was stashed

out of our everyday reach, in libraries, museums and galleries. Nowadays search engines have obliterated the delays involved in searching through a library's murky, maze-like stacks.

What this means is that the presence of the past in our lives has increased immeasurably and insidiously. Old stuff either directly permeates the present, or lurks just beneath the surface of the current, in the form of on-screen windows to other times. We've become so used to this convenient access that it is a struggle to recall that life wasn't always like this; that relatively recently, one lived most of the time in a cultural present tense, with the past confined to specific zones, trapped in particular objects and locations.

The easiest way to convey how things have changed is to compare the present with conditions when I was a lad back in the late seventies. Let's look at music first. Record companies deleted records from their catalogues in those days; I dare say you could find out-of-print releases in second-hand stores or obtain them from specialist mail-order companies, but the whole record-collector culture was in its infancy. I can distinctly remember the first few times I noticed reissues getting reviewed in the music papers – Tim Buckley's *Greetings from LA*, a pair of Faust albums – because it was a really unusual occurrence. Box sets and deluxe repackagings of classic artists were virtually unheard of in the late seventies. Listening to old music was limited to what you could find in shops, what you could afford on a limited budget. You could also tape music from the collections of your friends, or from public libraries, but this was limited by what was available and the cost of blank cassettes. Today, any young person has access to virtually anything that's ever been recorded, free of charge, and anyone can easily bone up on all the history and context of the music through Wikipedia and a thousand music blogs and fan sites.

The situation was similar in other areas of popular culture. TV

repeats were few and far between, rarely dating back further than a few years. There were no channels devoted entirely to vintage TV, no DVD collections of classic series, no Netflix or even video stores. Classic movies and cineaste obscurities would flicker onto TV schedules, but if you missed them, they were gone, utterly inaccessible (apart from fleeting, unpredictable appearances at 'midnight movie'-type cinemas that screened esoteric repertory).

Our relationship to time and space in this YouTubeWikipedia-RapidshareiTunesSpotify era has been utterly transformed. Distance and delay have been eroded to nearly nothing. To give you just one example, close at hand: while I was writing the preceding paragraph, I was listening to a parody version of Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 (the Pastoral Symphony) on a compilation of 'comic' avant-garde music called *Smiling Through My Teeth*. This made me want to hear the real thing in un-mangled form. I could easily have strolled across the apartment to the walk-in closet where most of my record collection is stashed, but rather than break my workflow I stayed in front of the computer and headed for YouTube, where I found dozens of versions performed by various orchestras. (I could equally have listened to it without pictures, via the sound files embedded at the Wikipedia entry on Beethoven's Sixth, or downloaded it in a trice, legally or illegally). I marvelled at how swiftly I could scratch this particular musical itch – though of course I got sucked into comparing the many alternate versions of the Pastoral juxtaposed on YouTube's scroll-down sidebar: proof, if any were needed, that there's a downside to access and choice.

YouTube is not the only online video upload site, of course. But as the pioneer in the field and the market-leader, YouTube's dominance means that it stands in for the whole industry in the same way that Kleenex and Hoover became general terms for tissue or vacuum cleaner. At the time of writing (the summer of 2010), YouTube has passed a major milestone: it's now streaming

a staggering two billion views per day, making it the third most visited website on the planet. Every minute another twenty-four hours' worth of video gets uploaded, and it would take the individual viewer 1,700 years to watch all of the hundreds of millions of videos on the site.

YouTube isn't just a website, though, or even a technology, but more a whole field of cultural practice. Media theorist Lucas Hilderbrand uses concepts like 'remediation' and 'post-broadcasting' to pinpoint what is innovative about YouTube. The 're' in remediation indicates that it is largely, if not completely, dependent on the output of the mainstream corporate entertainment industry: music promos made by and paid for by major labels, network TV programmes, Hollywood movies. Of course, there is a lot of other stuff 'up there' that is non-mainstream and DIY: esoteric and underground music/art/film/animation, amateur videos of babies and cats doing cute things, teenagers goofing around in their bedrooms or in the street, footage of bands playing live documented by fans using cellphones. But a high proportion of the content of YouTube is mainstream entertainment and news re-presented, in excerpted form, by its consumers: talk-show snippets, period-piece TV commercials, theme songs, long-lost vintage footage of bands performing on TV, favourite sequences from movies. As for 'post-broadcasting', the 'post' has two connotations: 'post' as in leaving behind the era of a cultural mainstream (the dominance of the big TV networks) and entering a consumer-empowered era of niche-audience narrowcasting; and 'post' as in postmodern (art that's based around pastiche and citation). YouTube teems with fan fiction-style treatments of mainstream entertainment: parodies, people doing karaoke versions of pop songs, mash-ups and other forms of 'culture jamming' based on the re-editing of footage. These mocking travesties recall the sample-based audio pranks of outfits like the KLF, Culturcide and Negativland.

Looking at YouTube from a purely musical perspective, two things are particularly striking about this new (post-)broadcast medium. The first is the way that YouTube has become the repository of ultra-rare TV appearances or bootleg live footage that once upon a time were treasured and traded by hardcore fans. Advertising in the back pages of *Goldmine* or *Record Collector*, communicating via fanzines and pen-pal networks, fans would swap or sell video cassettes, copied and recopied so many times that the image of Elvis or Bowie could only be dimly perceived through a blizzard of dubbed distortion. Nowadays this stuff lives on YouTube, freely available to anybody who cares enough to click. When I think of how useful this would have been to me when writing my post-punk history *Rip It Up* (which was finished about eighteen months before YouTube launched in the winter of 2005), I have mixed emotions: retrospective frustration offset by a strange feeling of relief. For as much as it would have been a great resource, I could easily have lost myself in the endless clips of live footage, ancient promo videos and TV appearances.

The other really interesting development affecting music has been the way that fans have transformed large swathes of this video archive into a purely audio resource, uploading songs accompanied by abstract, screen-saver-type moving patterns or a still image (in many cases, just a still of the record cover or label, or a grainy shot of the record playing on a turntable). Whole albums are being put up on YouTube by fans, with each track accompanied by the same generic and desultory image. YouTube's combination of promo videos and audio uploads means that it has become a public library of recorded sound (albeit a disorganised, messy one, with few omissions but plenty of repetition and 'damaged copies'). You can even 'borrow' without returning, using tools like Dirpy to convert YouTube videos into MP3s.

YouTube is much easier to consult than my huge and disorganised record collection. On some occasions I've actually

downloaded albums off the Web that I already own, just to avoid the bother of rummaging through boxes for them. No matter that the CD or vinyl will sound so much better. MP3s are good enough if you're in a hurry (in my case, I'm usually looking to check something for reference purposes, so effectively treating the music as information rather than an immersive sonic experience). YouTube itself is an example of this kind of digital culture trade-off between quality and convenience. The medium has 'crummy image and sound quality', notes Hilderbrand, describing how the tolerable quality of the picture when in small-screen mode is exposed in all its true lo-res crapness when you click on 'full screen'. But just as listeners have accepted the 'lossy', thin-bodied sound of MP3s because of the advantages of compact storage and ease of exchange, nobody seems to mind the reduced fidelity of television viewing via computer screen (even though it is running in the opposite direction elsewhere with high-definition TV, 5.0 surround-sound home-movie theatres, 3D movies, and so forth).

In compensation, we have the vastly enhanced access and the quantity-over-quality volume and range of the online archive. We also have the consumer-empowering convenience of the time display at the bottom of the video, which allows the viewer to drag the scroll bar and jump within the video clip (or song) to get to 'the good bit' sooner. YouTube, based around excerpts, is already in the business of fragmenting larger narratives (the programme, the movie, the album), but this function actually encourages us, as viewers, to break cultural fragments into even smaller sub-units, insidiously eroding our ability to concentrate and our willingness to let something unfold. As with the Internet as a whole, our sense of temporality grows ever more brittle and inconstant: restlessly snacking on data bytes, we flit fitfully in search of the next instant sugar rush.

YouTube encourages this kind of drift through its sidebar of videos deemed, often by skewed logic, to be related to the one

you're watching. It is hard not to fall into an inattentive, easily detached mode of viewing somewhere between browsing and channel-surfing (except that you're always flitting within one channel, YouTube, itself now a province of the Google empire, which bought the company in October 2006). This lateral drift is not just from artist to artist or genre to genre but a wandering across time, since video artifacts from different eras are jumbled promiscuously and linked by a latticework of criss-crossing associations.

This kind of drift stems partly from the disorderly nature of YouTube, which is more like a jumbled attic than an archive, only laxly framed and annotated. But elsewhere on the Web, all kinds of official organisations and amateur associations are assembling well-managed cultural databases whose contents are available to the general public. The British Library, for instance, recently made its huge collection of ethnographic music available online free of charge: approximately 28,000 recordings and 2,000 hours of traditional music, ranging from wax-cylinder documentation of aboriginal songs made by the anthropologist Alfred Cort Haddon in 1898 to the Decca West Africa label's mid-twentieth-century recordings of calypso and quickstep. The National Film Board of Canada operates a similar stream-for-free archive of its renowned documentaries, nature shows and animations by luminaries such as Norman McLaren. Then there's UbuWeb, a gold mine of avant-garde cinema, sound poetry, music and text administered by fans but presented with a scholarly meticulousness. UbuWeb is dedicated to making works that would otherwise languish in the storage chambers of art museums or the recesses of university collections, perhaps making very occasional public appearances at festivals and exhibitions, globally and permanently available.

Beyond organisations like UbuWeb, there's a teeming hinterland of blogs like The Sound of Eye, BibliOdyssey, 45cat and Found Objects, operated by individuals or small groups of

like-minds, amateur curators who are frenetically hurling all manner of esoteric images and sounds up onto the Internet: curios and lost classics of twentieth-century book illustration, graphic design and typography; short avant-garde films and animations; scanned articles and, increasingly, entire issues of obscure periodicals, journals and fanzines; ancient public-information films and the intros to innumerable long-lost children's shows; and so forth. If I had a second life (one that was also blessed with a private income), I could happily while away my days feasting on all this culture carrion.

On the Internet, the past and the present commingle in a way that makes time itself mushy and spongiform. YouTube is quintessentially Web 2.0 in the way that it promises immortality to every video uploaded: theoretically the content could stay up there for ever. You can flit from the archaic to the up-to-the-minute in a click. The result, culturally, is a paradoxical combination of speed and standstill. You can see this manifested on every level of Web 2.0 reality: an incredibly rapid turnover of news (current-affairs and politics blogs updating every ten minutes, trending topics on Twitter, blog buzz) coexisting with the stubborn persistence of nostalgic crud. Into the chasm between these two poles drops both the recent past and what you might call 'the long present': trends with staying power, bands with careers longer than an album, subcultures and movements as opposed to fads and flavours. The recent past drops away into an amnesiac void, while the long present gets chiselled down to wafer-width, simply because of the incredible pace with which the pages of the current and the topical are refreshed.

OUTSELLING THE PRESENT

'Pop music is more fleeting nowadays,' says Ed Christman, the senior retail editor at *Billboard*. I contacted Christman because

I wanted to find out if consumers were buying more old music these days. He explained that the industry divided releases up into 'current' (which spanned from day one of release to fifteen months later) and 'catalogue' (from the sixteenth month onwards). But catalogue itself was divided up into two categories: what was relatively recent, and what was 'deep catalogue', to which music was assigned three years after release. Christman's sense was that the category of relatively recent catalogue (releases between fifteen months and three years old) was 'not as strong as it used to be'. And it's true that bands do seem to have shorter careers, with blockbuster debuts followed by flops; the greater proportion of bands with real staying power seem to be leftovers from the sixties, seventies and eighties.

When it came to my main area of intrigue – the relative ratio between old-music purchases versus new-music purchases – Christman dug up some statistics for me. In the year 2000, he said, catalogue sales (including both recent catalogue and deep) accounted for 34.4 per cent of total album sales in America, while current stood at 65.6 per cent; by the year 2008, catalogue had increased to 41.7 per cent, while current was 58.3. That didn't seem such a dramatic change, but according to Christman this steady, year-by-year shift all through the 2000s towards older music was very significant. It contrasted with an absolutely static ratio between current and catalogue that was maintained during the entire nineties (there are no figures for prior to that).

What made the increase in catalogue sales even more significant was that it was actually harder for consumers to get hold of non-current releases thanks to the appalling decline of record retail. 'All the traditional record stores that had deep catalogue and lots of it have been going out of business,' Christman said. He added that the ones that survived had been forced to carry non-musical products (such as games), which meant they drastically reduced the number of music titles they kept in stock. For

instance, in 2000, Borders carried fifty thousand titles; by 2008, that figure had gone down to under ten thousand.

But if the traditional breadth of deep catalogue had been disappearing from record stores, which themselves had been drastically thinning in number, that begged the question: how had sales of old music managed to increase during the past decade? Part of the explanation was the rise of online retailers like Amazon, who could maintain vast back stock because of their economies of scale and warehouses in low-rent zones. You also had specific catalogue titles being reissued as 'new spiffy things', as Christman put it: anniversary editions and deluxe double CDs that were packaged and promoted as if they were new releases, and accordingly got prominent display in record stores. Finally, there was the rise of digital sales: the iPod explosion reawakened a lot of lapsed music fans' ardour for music (some of which would be old music, a catalogue boom similar to the CD-reissuing of classic albums from the mid-eighties onwards), who were also able for the first time to buy tracks rather than whole albums. Christman told me that 2009 was 'the first year that Soundscan separated out current and catalogue for its digital figures', and this had revealed that catalogue accounts for 'the majority of digital-track sales, 64.3 per cent compared to current's 35.7 per cent'. I suspect there must be a similar heavy slant towards old music in illegal downloads. It stands to reason: the past can't help but outweigh the present, not just in sheer quantity but also in quality too. For argument's sake, let's assume that approximately the same amount of great music is produced each year (averaging out the fluctuations within specific genres). That would mean each new year's harvest of brilliance must compete with the past's ever more mountainous heap of greatness. How many records released in 2011 will be as worthwhile an acquisition for a neophyte listener as *Rubber Soul*, *Astral Weeks*, *Closer*, *Hatful of Hollow*?

The concept of back catalogue is a key element of Chris

Anderson's much-discussed, and sometimes disputed, theory of the Long Tail. The slant of the argument is the familiar techno-utopian narrative we've seen so often in *Wired*, where Anderson's original article ran before it was expanded into the best-selling book *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More*. He claimed that the retail environment created by the Internet shifts the balance in favour of the little guy (the plucky individual entrepreneur, small independent publishers and record labels, minority-interest artists), as opposed to corporate-entertainment conglomerates with their orientation towards blockbuster hits and megastars, big first-week sales and expensive promotional campaigns.

The intriguing subtext to the Long Tail theory is that the new-media environment also shifts the balance in favour of the past and to the disadvantage of the culturally current. Right at the start of his original October 2004 *Wired* article, Anderson tells the story of a currently best-selling memoir about mountaineering (*Into Thin Air*) whose success directed consumers towards a much older book on the same subject by a different author (Joe Simpson's *Touching the Void*), thanks to Amazon.com's 'If you like that, try this' algorithm and readers' recommendations. Simpson's book had only ever been moderately successful and was actually on the verge of going out of print, but thanks to *Into Thin Air* it resurged and became a best-seller. Anderson describes how Amazon 'created the *Touching the Void* phenomenon by combining infinite shelf space with real-time information about buying trends and public opinion', and characterises the resulting 'rising demand for an obscure book' as a victory of the margins against the mainstream, of quality against force-fed, top-down pap. But when Anderson crows that 'now *Touching the Void* outsells *Into Thin Air* more than two to one', he is actually describing an instance of the past defeating the (then) present: 1988 eclipsing 1999.

The central thesis of the Long Tail is that 'the tyranny of physical space' has been overthrown by the Internet. Retailers in the pre-Net era were limited by the number of consumers that could physically reach the store. They were also limited by the amount of stock they could keep, because the closer you are to densely populated areas, the more expensive storage space becomes. But the Web allowed companies to locate in remote, low-rent areas where they could warehouse huge volumes of back stock, allowing for unprecedented range. They could also aggregate geographically dispersed niche audiences, overcoming the problem of 'an audience too thinly spread' being the 'the same as no audience at all'. But the Long Tail syndrome also represents a victory over the tyranny of time: the dominance in retailing of the current and the brand new. In traditional retail, storage space and display space are paid for by a certain rate of sale, which is what makes it worth keeping a CD on the racks in a record store or a DVD on the shelves in a video store; at a certain point, older stock must be marked down or got rid of. When storage space gets dramatically cheaper (operating out of low-rent, extra-urban areas) or infinitesimally small through digitisation (Netflix's online repertory of films and television series, digital-music companies like iTunes and eMusic), the result is that inventory can expand vastly. If the store display areas are online and virtual, there is also absolutely no pressure to get rid of older, slow-selling items to make space for newer releases.

'From DVDs at Netflix to music videos on Yahoo! . . . to songs in the iTunes Music Store and Rhapsody Anderson exults, 'people are going deep into the catalog, down the long, long list of available titles, far past what's available at Blockbuster Video, Tower Records, and Barnes & Noble.' Going 'far past' means going *far into the past*, as much as it can also mean extending way beyond the mainstream (to esoteric independent-label-culture releases and exotic imports). Because small sales over a long period count

as profit when storage costs are infinitesimal, Anderson believes that the Long Tail approach should entail making available 'huge chunks of the archive' at a budget price. He specifically instructs the music industry to re-release 'all the back catalogs as quickly as it can – thoughtlessly, automatically, and at industrial scale'. Which is more or less what was happening all through the last decade and going back to the nineties, either actively instigated by the labels themselves or licensed out to specialist companies who trawl through older and bigger labels' back catalogues for Famous Band's Bassist's solo albums, offshoot projects, before-they-got-famous early stabs and after-the-fame-faded-away has-been releases.

The result has been a steady encroachment by past production on the window of attention that current production had hitherto dominated. In a sense, the past has always been in competition with the present, culturally speaking. But the terrain has gradually shifted to the past's drastic advantage, thanks to late-nineties and early-2000s developments such as satellite and internet radio (some of whose huge array of channels are formatted to vintage genres or generational cohorts) and the internet-connected 'infinite jukebox' that allows bar patrons to select from as many as two million tunes.

Underlying these recent innovations is the fundamental switchover from analogue to digital: from recordings based around analogues of waveforms (vinyl, magnetic tape) to recordings that work through the encoding and decoding of information (compact discs, MP3s). This revolution was pushed to the hilt by the music industry in the eighties, apparently quite oblivious to its Achilles heel: it is so much easier to copy audio and video when it is encoded as data. A vinyl analogue recording can only be copied in real time; the magnetic information on an audio cassette or video tape can be copied at only slightly sped-up rates (otherwise there's a drastic loss of fidelity). Digital encoding enables much

faster copying with minimal depreciation of quality. A copy of a copy of a copy is basically the same as the original, because it is information, the digital code of zeroes and ones, that is being replicated.

The implications of this fatal flaw became apparent not long after the launch of software for encoding MP3s in July 1994, followed a year later by the first MP3 player (WinPlay3). Developed by the German research institute Fraunhofer with the goal of being the worldwide standard medium for digital audio/video entertainment, the MP3 gradually spread during the late nineties. But it only really took off as bandwidth increased and a succession of peer-to-peer file-sharing networks and services (Napster, BitTorrent, Soulseek, etc.) took turns to flourish and wither. The essence of the MP3 is compression. Space (the sonic depth of a recording) is squeezed into a vastly smaller physical area than a vinyl record, an analogue tape cassette or even a laser-inscribed compact disc, while time is similarly compressed in the sense that the time it takes to copy or transmit through the Internet a piece of music is much briefer than the actual duration of the musical experience.

According to the music-technology scholar Jonathan Sterne, Fraunhofer developed the MP3 by devising 'a mathematical model of human auditory perception' to work out what data they could get away with discarding because it would not be heard by the average listener in the average listening situation. The technicalities of this process are complex and somewhat mind-boggling (for instance, parts of the frequency spectrum are converted into mono, while other parts – the stretch of the audio spectrum that most listeners notice – stay in stereo). Suffice to say that the result of the process is the characteristic flatness of sound-picture and the thin-bodied textures we've all grown accustomed to through hearing music as MP3s. (Of course, any sense of diminishment of sonic richness only really applies to those of us old enough to

have had a history of listening to music as vinyl or compact disc; for many younger listeners, MP3 and music heard through computer speakers and iPods is simply what recorded sound sounds like). The sheer convenience of MP3s, in terms of sharing, acquiring and portability (what the industry calls 'place-shifting', moving your music between playback devices and contexts of use), has encouraged us to adapt to the lower-quality sound. Besides, most music fans aren't audiophiles hung up on sound reproduction and intangible qualities like 'presence'. Audiophiles are usually analogue fanatics, into 180-gram vinyl and turntables that cost thousands of pounds. But the fact is that even within the realm of digital music there's a pronounced difference in quality between an MP3 and a pre-recorded CD. Every so often I'll get the proper CD version of an album I've fallen in love with as a download, and I'll get a rude shock when confronted by the sense of dimension and spatiality of the music's layers, the sculpted force of the drums, the sheer vividness of the sound. The difference between CD and MP3 is similar to that between 'not from concentrate' orange juice and juice that's been reconstituted from concentrate. (In this analogy, vinyl would be freshly squeezed, perhaps.) Converting music to MP3 is a bit like the concentration process, and it's done for much the same reason: it's much cheaper to transport concentrate because without the water it takes up a lot less volume and it weighs a lot less. Yet we can all taste the difference.

SURFING AND SKIMMING

What the inventors of the MP3 were banking on was that most of the time most of us are not listening that closely, and we aren't listening in ideal circumstances. According to Sterne, the MP3 was designed with the assumption that the listener is either engaged in other activities (work, socialising) or, if listening immersively,

doing so in a noisy environment (public transport, a car, walking on a busy street). 'The MP3 is a form designed for massive exchange, casual listening and massive accumulation,' he argues. Just as 'concentrate' is not a drink to savour, zipped-and-opened sound files are not music to roll around your ears. The audio equivalent of fast food, the MP3 is the ideal format for an era where current music, with its high-turnover micro-trends and endless give-away podcasts and DJ mixes, is increasingly something you *keep up with*.

So many of the consumer-friendly advances of the digital era relate to time management: the freedom to be inattentive or interrupted during a television programme (pause, rewind), to reschedule the viewing of programmes to when it's more convenient and to stockpile televisual time for a rainy day (recordable DVDs, TiVo). The arrival of the CD player in the mid-eighties was an early glimpse of how music would be affected by digitalisation. Unlike record players and most tape decks, the CD player usually came with a remote control. The record player is an unwieldy mechanical device for extracting sound waves etched into vinyl grooves; the CD player is a data-decoding machine, and therefore much easier to pause and restart, skip to a different track, and so forth. The CD player made it vastly more tempting to disrupt the flow of musical time: to answer the door or go to the toilet, to leap ahead to your favourite tracks or even your favourite *bit* of a track. The CD remote, essentially the same device as a TV remote, brought music under the sway of channel-surfing logic.

This was the dawn of a new digital-era way of experiencing time, something we've since become totally familiar with. And every gain in consumer-empowering convenience has come at the cost of disempowering the power of art to dominate our attention, to induce a state of aesthetic surrender. Which means that our gain is also our loss. It is also becoming very clear that the brittle temporality of networked life is not good for our

psychological well-being; it makes us restless, erodes our ability to focus and be in the moment. We are always interrupting ourselves, disrupting the flow of experience.

It's not just time that is affected, it's space too. The integrity of 'here' is being fractured just as much as the integrity of 'now'. Research by Ofcom, the organisation with authority over Britain's telecommunications, suggests that families congregate in the living room to watch TV but are only partially present, because they are busy texting or surfing the Web via laptops and handheld devices. They are plugged into social networks even while nestling in the bosom of the family, a syndrome that's been dubbed 'connected cocooning'. Just as the Internet makes the present porous with wormholes into the past, so the intimate space of the family is contaminated by the outside world via telemetric streams of information.

The final years of the 2000s saw a spate of hand-wringing articles about the pernicious effects of webbed life on one's ability to concentrate, along with testimonials from people who'd tried to break their addiction to the Internet by going offline permanently. In his famous 2008 *Atlantic* essay 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?', Nicholas Carr mourned his de-evolution from 'a scuba diver in the sea of words' to someone who 'zip[s] along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski', and quoted the pathologist and medical blogger Bruce Friedman's plaintive admission that his thinking had taken on a 'staccato' quality: 'I can't read *War and Peace* anymore, I've lost the ability to do that. Even a blog post of more than three or four paragraphs is too much to absorb. I skim it.'

Carr's essay, which he developed into the 2010 book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, generated a huge amount of commentary, some predictably characterising him as a Luddite and Gutenberg throwback, but more frequently chiming in with a sense of recognition about the ways in which webbed existence was interfering with capacity for focused work

and fully immersed enjoyment. Writing in the webzine *Geometer*, Matthew Cole picked up on Carr's point about hyperlinks ('unlike footnotes they don't merely point to related works; they propel you toward them') to characterise net life in terms of 'a perpetual state of almost-deciding': a vacillatory suspension of skipping and skimming that offered 'the *illusion* of action and decision' but was really an insidious form of paralysis.

In lots of ways, though, this flighty state of distraction is the appropriate response to the superabundance of choices. The horrifying (to a writer) meme 'tl dr' (too long, didn't read) has yet to be joined by 'tl dl' and 'tl dw' (too long, didn't listen; too long didn't watch), but it can only be a matter of time, because as many of us can attest, we're already at the point of, for instance, dragging the scroll bar ahead when checking out a video on YouTube. Attention-deficit disorder is the name of this condition, but like so many ailments and dysfunctions under late capitalism, the source of the disorder is not internal to the sufferer, not his or her fault; it's caused by the environment, in this case the datascape. Our attention is dispersed, tantalised, teased. So far there is no real equivalent in music to skim-reading; you can't speed up listening itself (although you can skip ahead or break off midway through and never pick up where you left off). But you can listen while doing other things: reading a book or magazine, or surfing the Web. Carr's 'shallows' refer to the experiential thin-ness of music or literature consumed in this multitasking fashion, the fainter imprint it leaves on our minds and hearts.

The rearrangement of time and space in the Internet age seems to be mirrored by distortions in one's sense of self, which feels splayed and stuffed. The playwright Richard Foreman used the image of 'pancake people' to describe what it feels like to be 'spread wide and thin as we connect with that vast network of information accessed by the mere touch of a button'. He contrasts this with the rich interior depths of the educated self shaped

by a predominantly literary culture, where identity is complex and 'cathedral-like'. Certainly as I sit in front of this computer I feel stretched and stressed by the options available. My self and the screen are one; the various pages and windows simultaneously open add up to a picture of 'continuous partial attention' (the term coined by Microsoft executive Linda Stone to describe the fragmented consciousness caused by multitasking). It's the 'present' I inhabit that really feels stretched thin, a here-and-now pierced by portals to innumerable potential elsewheres and elsewhens.

A while ago I felt a strange pang of nostalgia for boredom, the kind of absolute emptiness so familiar when I was a teenager, or a college student, or a dole-claiming idler in my early twenties. Those great gaping gulfs of time with absolutely nothing to fill them would induce a sensation of tedium so intense it was almost spiritual. This was the pre-digital era (before CDs, before personal computers, long before the Internet) when in the UK there were only three or four TV channels, mostly with nothing you'd want to watch; only a couple of just-about-tolerable radio stations; no video stores or DVDs to buy; no email, no blogs, no webzines, no social media. To alleviate boredom, you relied on books, magazines, records, all of which were limited by what you could afford. You might have also resorted to mischief, or drugs, or creativity. It was a cultural economy of dearth and delay. As a music fan, you waited for things to come out or be aired: an album, the new issues of the weekly music papers, John Peel's radio show at ten o'clock, *Top of the Pops* on Thursday. There were long anticipation-stoking gaps, and then there were Events, and if you happened to miss the programme, the Peel show or the gig, it was *gone*.

Boredom is different nowadays. It's about super-saturation, distraction, restlessness. I am often bored but it's not for lack of options: a thousand TV channels, the bounty of Netflix, countless

net radio stations, innumerable unlistened-to albums, unwatched DVDs and unread books, the maze-like anarchive of YouTube. Today's boredom is not hungry, a response to deprivation; it is a loss of cultural appetite, in response to the surfeit of claims on your attention and time.

NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT

In one of the most famous scenes in Nicolas Roeg's movie *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, David Bowie's alien Thomas Jerome Newton is seen watching a dozen televisions stacked on top of each other at once. That image – the super-advanced being capable of assimilating all these separate yet simultaneous data streams – seems a potent emblem for where our culture is heading. By the end of the movie, Newton is stranded on Earth, prevented by the human authorities from returning to his family on the distant home planet. He becomes an alcoholic, but also a cult musician, releasing eerie records under the name The Visitor. I'm not sure we actually get to hear what his music sounds like; I've always imagined it might be reminiscent of the second side of *Low*, melancholy vapours of Satie-esque sound, wintry and emaciated. But what would Newton's music have been like if it had in some way paralleled the saturated, overloaded gaze with which he watched those multiple TVs? It might have foreshadowed some of the music produced in the later years of the 2000s, which suffers from the syndrome I call 'glutted/clotted'.

Musicians glutted with influences and inputs almost inevitably make clotted music: rich and potent on some levels, but ultimately fatiguing and bewildering for most listeners. The problem is most acute on the hipster fringes of music-making: free of commercial considerations, which push musicians towards accessibility and simplicity, they can explore the info-cosmos of webbed music, venturing into remote reaches of history and

distant corners of the globe alike. Two recent examples of this hyper-eclectic approach are Hudson Mohawke's *Butter* and Flying Lotus's *Cosmogramma*, from 2009 and 2010 respectively. *Butter* is prog rock updated for the Pro Tools era, a CGI-like frightmare of garish and overworked sound. *Cosmogramma* is hip-hop jazz for the ADD generation.

If it takes time to get to grips with this music, it's because, in some ways, too much time has been squeezed into it. Time in the sense of musical labour: musicians working in home-studio conditions, using digital-audio workstation programs, don't have financial restrictions on the amount of man-hours they can lavish on their work. But also time in a cultural sense: each of the musical styles these artists digitally splice together represents a tradition that evolved and mutated over decades, that in some sense contains embedded historical time. Naturally it requires many hours of fully attentive listening to unpack its complexities.

FLYING LOTUS AND THE WEB OF SOUND

Critics concur: there's something quintessentially webby about the music of Flying Lotus, aka Steve Ellison. *The Quietus*'s Colin McKean, for instance, described *Cosmogramma* as 'a sprawling, post-Web 2.0 cacophony like hurtling through the digital darkness of Spotify with everything blaring at once'. FlyLo is at once locally rooted and a post-geographical entity. Ellison is the hub of a Los Angeles scene that includes the club Low End Theory, artists like Gaslamp Killer and Gonjasufi, and Ellison's own Brainfeeder label. But FlyLo are also considered part of an amorphous, transcontinental genre known as wonky (a controversial term accepted by few of the artists) that includes UK artists such as Hudson Mohawke and Rustie. Prominent in this music's super-hybrid DNA are strands of glitchy electronica, experimental hip hop and spacey seventies jazz fusion. Its off-kilter beat structures and mutant funk grooves are further spiced with day-glo synth tones and snazzy riffs that hark back to eighties electro-funk and video-game music. It's this omnivorousness that makes FlyLo and its genre so characteristically Web 2.0. As Ellison put it in one interview, 'Why not just have all these things from our past as well as all of the newest technology from today in one, and just really come up with the craziest shit we can?'

Time, of course, is the one thing that most listeners don't have at their disposal these days.

Artists and listeners are in the same boat, and that boat is sinking in 'the mire of options', to use the Zen Buddhist term. 'Restriction is the mother of invention,' said Holger Czukay of Can, pointedly defining the group's minimal approach against the maximalism of their prog-rock and jazz-fusion contemporaries. But you might also say that 'restriction is the mother of immersion'. In other words, truly experiencing music in any kind of intimate depth means reconciling oneself to the reality of finitude: you'll never be able to listen properly to more than a fraction of the torrent of music being made today, let alone across the span of human history.

This is one of the big questions of our era: can culture survive in conditions of limitlessness? Yet as much as the Internet's instant access overwhelms, it also presents opportunities. There

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What makes the music timely, then, is not its components (which are from everywhere and everywhen) but the way it is put together ('We have the technology!' exults Ellison) and the sensibility it mirrors. FlyLo is made by and for nervous systems moulded by online culture; this music is drifting, distracted, assembling itself according to an additive logic of audio greed. When Nicholas Carr writes in *The Shallows* about how the 'calm, focused . . . linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts', this could be the opening paragraph of a *Cosmogramma* review. FlyLo music seems to contain its own hyperlinks (multiple stylistic jump-cuts can occur within a single track) and windows (up to eighty layers in a single *Cosmogramma* track). It's the skittering scatterbrain sound of networked consciousness, repeatedly interrupted by cutaways, freeze-frames and zooms in and out of focus.

Most listeners find *Cosmogramma* to be daunting and overwhelming initially. *Pitchfork*'s Joe Colly described the music as 'frustratingly unstable until you hear it a few times and the pieces begin to interlock and congeal'. I hated *Cosmogramma* at first. Eventually I found a way into it. But the 'good bits', for this listener, occur in the idyllic moments of clarity and resolution: particular

are artists who are navigating the Web's choppy info-ocean and, specifically, sifting through YouTube's immense flea market of memory, finding new possibilities for creativity.

Nico Muhly, a rising young composer who started as a protégé of Philip Glass, often draws on source material from the Web in his work. Some of his pieces were initially sparked by YouTube finds. He might, for instance, compose a violin concerto based around Renaissance ideas about astronomy, an interest first triggered by stumbling on eighties educational videos about the solar system uploaded by some nameless nutter onto YouTube, complete with voice-overs from now vaguely kitschy figures like Carl Sagan. Or he'll work on a piece designed to accompany bizarrely banal YouTube clips, videos of someone's backyard or a person doing housework.

When I went round to Muhly's apartment in Manhattan's Chinatown to interview him over lunch (an expertly prepared cauliflower cheese), he told me he was working on an 'internet opera' inspired by the true story of a 'younger boy who invents seven online identities to seduce an older boy, and then he gets stabbed in the chest'. On the subject of the influence of YouTube

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portions of multisegmented songs, or occasionally whole tracks like 'Mmmhmm', sleepy hollows of melodic repose that offer a haven from the *Koyaanisqatsi*-like on-rush.

The paradox of *Cosmogramma* is that it is a classic 'grower', that old-fashioned term for an album that requires many plays before it unfolds its magic. *Cosmogramma* reflects the dispersed, fractured sensibility of digital modernity, but it really demands a mode of contemplative listening associated with the analogue era. FlyLo music clearly has spiritual intent, yet it mirrors and exacerbates the kind of jittery mind-state least conducive to meditative consciousness. *Cosmogramma*, Ellison explains, means 'the studies that map out the universe and the relations of heaven and hell'. Perhaps what he is trying to 'say' with his music is that what seems like hell (the stimuli overload of the Web, where everything becomes porn) could be heaven, if we could just find a way of grooving with and through the chaos.

and the Web in general on his music, Muhly talked about how he would disappear down 'Internet wormholes. The Web is really scary for that! If you start checking out people who dress up their miniature ponies like works of art, there's five hundred thousand things like that!'

The *New Yorker* profile that first brought his name to wide attention made much of the fact that Muhly was a Web 2.0 generation composer, writing his music onto a virtual score in his computer while replying to emails, chatting via instant messaging and participating in several simultaneous online Scrabble games. Clearly a high-functioning creature of the multitasking era, Muhly's approach to composition is characteristically webby in its associational drift. He calls it 'penetrative narrative', but it is really more like an anti-narrative. And Muhly's mode of research is the same as his mode of composition: non-linear. 'Plunging through things in another way, like putting a knife through a telephone book,' is how he describes it. 'A particular area, like, say astronomy, leads to something else, and that in turn will lead to something else altogether. This endless thing where there's no beginning and there's no end, and the narrative of it is just your *path through it*.'

Where Muhly moves through the world of Carnegie Hall and the English National Opera, Daniel Lopatin exists in a totally different milieu of modern music: the experimental electronic underground of Brooklyn squat gigs and vinyl/cassette-only micro-labels. Yet these two talents are responding to similar macro-cultural shifts: the emergence of the Internet as a landscape of the sublime, occupying a roughly equivalent place to Nature in the imagination of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century composer, and to the city for the twentieth-century composer.

In his cramped Brooklyn bachelor pad, Lopatin's arsenal of vintage synths and rhythm boxes is just an arm's reach away from his giant-screen computer. He spends most of his time indoors,

either doodling on the synths or surfing the Web. The recordings he's released under the name Oneohtrix Point Never – like 2009's *Rifts*, voted the no. 2 album of the year by *Wire* magazine – are for the most part amorphously abstract yet harmonically euphonious instrumentals created using arpeggiated synth melodies and pulsating sequencer patterns. But the 'echo jams' he did under aliases like KGB Man and Sunsetcorp are what made the widest impact: mash-ups of audio and video material he's scavenged on YouTube. In particular, 'Nobody Here' – built out of a tiny loop of vocal from Chris De Burgh's 'The Lady in Red' and a vintage eighties computer-animation graphic called 'Rainbow Road' – became a YouTube hit in its own right, chalking up over thirty thousand hits over the course of several months. Not massive compared to Lady Gaga, but in the context of the underground scene he comes from, 'Nobody Here' was a *Thriller*-level smash.

Part of its appeal is that listeners accustomed to thinking of Chris De Burgh's late-eighties chart-topper as putridly sentimental find themselves moved by the desolate yearning in the tiny excerpt that Lopatin zooms in on. Combined with 'Rainbow Road' (a color-spectrum ramp of fluorescent light that sways back and forth across the screen against a backdrop of skyscrapers), the effect is an eerie melancholy. A fan of vintage 'vector graphics and cad-cam eighties video art', Lopatin was drawn to this particular 'found visual' because the 'Gothic urban skyline' undercut the 'sappy, sentimental associations of rainbows'. It also crystallised his alienated feelings about his own life in the city. Hence the aching resonance of the Chris De Burgh loop: 'There's nobody here.'

Lopatin has been echo-jamming for years. It started as a way to bunk off from his dreary day job without actually leaving his office cubicle. 'I was a total 9-to-5er, so bored, and this was the kind of music I could make at work, just ripping stuff from YouTube. Back then I wasn't doing it to impress anyone, it was

just a really cathartic thing to do while I was doing menial office labour.' An 'echo jam' is not just a straightforward montage of an audio loop and a video loop. After isolating the micro-excerpts he finds compelling – a splinter of longing from an old Kate Bush or Fleetwood Mac song, a heartbroken pang from Janet Jackson or Alexander O'Neal, the dreamy vocal-only breakdown of a Eurotrance anthem – Lopatin coats it with 'a ton of echo'. Because he's 'not a party animal', he'll also slow the music down, a technique derived from Houston's legendary DJ Screw, whose 'screwed' mixtapes involved playing gangsta rap at narcotically torpid tempos. Lopatin also slows down the video loops, which are all sourced from YouTube and then converted and edited using Windows Movie Maker. Among his favourite sources are eighties TV commercials from the Far East or from the Communist bloc promoting new video and audio technology. In one echo jam, a young Soviet couple blissfully share a 'his and hers' portable cassette player with twin headphone sockets.

Lopatin likes to downplay the creativity involved in echo jams. 'It's really simple. I'm uncomfortable with the idea that I'm an author of this stuff. I'm just participating in stuff that's happening all across YouTube, kids doing similar things all over.' That may be true, but the surplus value Lopatin brings is the conceptual framework to his projects, which relates to cultural memory and the buried utopianism within capitalist commodities, especially those related to consumer technology in the computing and audio/video entertainment area. Gathering together his best echo jams for the 2009 DVD *Memory Vague*, Lopatin argued in the liner note that 'no commercial work is outside of the reach of artistic reclamation'.

These preoccupations came to fruition with a long piece Lopatin created in 2010 for an exhibition of sound art: a deconstructive unravelling of a 1994 infomercial he found on YouTube. Sixteen minutes of corporate propaganda for the Performa

('the family Macintosh from Apple, with the future built right in') is converted into a thirty-minute echo-jam symphony. 'The Martinettis Bring Home a Computer', as both the original infomercial and Lopatin's treatment are titled, captures a moment in the early nineties when the information superhighway held out the same promise of emancipation and expanded horizons that the creation of the interstate freeway system once did.

What originally snagged Lopatin's Web-surfing eye was the high production values and 'Robert Altman-movie-level' acting of the infomercial, probably deposited on YouTube as an online resumé by its director (although these days it's perfectly possible that there are actually fans of infomercials, auteurist connoisseurs assiduously curating the genre on the Web). Lopatin's deconstructed version starts with snippets of the elegiac music on the original score, which he loops into an endless wistful-yet-gaseous refrain. Gradually, some alarming slithering and retching sounds insinuate themselves into the idyll, along with the restless tap tap tap of computer keys. The slimy sounds reveal themselves to be grotesquely slowed-down dialogue from the family scenes in the infomercial: 'We were having the time of our lives with the computer'; 'There's a whole other world out there'; 'The funny thing was, the computer fit right into our family just like it belonged.'

Lopatin describes this section of the piece as 'an exploding mess of cultural noise, all these voices and desires overlapping, as the family members express their desire to own this computer and why they want it. The infomercial's angle is that it's a kind of Renaissance machine and it'll make the whole family into this holistic entity. Every member will get what they need out of it. It'll bring them together but it'll also bring out the individuality.' But what the computer ultimately represents is a new stage in the disintegration of the family: the networked family is promiscuously intermeshed with external systems, plugged into remote streams of data. 'Nil Admirari', a cacophonous track on Oneohtrix Point

Never's 2010 album *Returnal*, explores the same idea: it's a sound-painting of a modern household, where the outside world's violence pours in through the cable lines, the domestic haven contaminated by toxic data. 'The mom's sucked into CNN, freaking out about Code Orange terrorist shit,' says Lopatin. 'Meanwhile, the kid is in the other room playing *Halo 3*, inside that weird Mars environment killing some James Cameron-type predator.'

If 'The Martinettis Bring Home a Computer' is about the sinister side of information technology, it's also about its seductiveness: the bright future that a new computer or digital gadget seems to herald. Yet the speed of technological advance means that each beloved machine is rendered obsolete with ruthless rapidity. With individuals and businesses throwing out info-tech every two or three years, obsolete computers are a huge environmental problem. 'I'm super into formats, into junk, into outmoded technology,' says Lopatin. 'I'm super into the idea that the rapid-fire pace of capitalism is destroying our relationships to objects. All this drives me back, but what drives me is a desire to connect, not to relive things. It's not nostalgia.' He argues that the idea of 'progress' itself is driven by the economic requirements of capitalism as much as by science or human creativity. In a 2009 manifesto-like article, he decried the fixation on linear progress, proposing instead the opening up of 'spaces for ecstatic regression We homage the past to mourn, to celebrate, and to time travel.'

Disappearing down 'Internet wormholes' – Nico Muhly's quippy description of his meanders across the Web – also contains the idea of time travel. The subject of endless speculation by physicists and a popular device in science fiction, the 'traversable wormhole' cuts through a fold in the fabric of the space–time continuum and creates a short cut; theoretically, it could work as a time tunnel. Muhly's wormhole metaphor brings out a quasi-astrophysical dimension to the Web: this is cyber*space*, a cosmos of information and memory. Which is also how archives work

– through the spatialisation of time. They are systems for orderly storage that distribute objects in subdivided space. What computers and the Web have done is to speed up drastically the process of retrieval and to make the past more accessible to everyone, no matter where they are located or whether they have institutional privileges.

For young artists like Lopatin and Muhly, YouTube presents amazing opportunities for 'ecstastic regression' and for time-tourist trips to exotic pockets of cultural strangeness. Lopatin uses the analogy of archaeologists stumbling on a lost civilisation. 'We approach the ruins and we look for symbols on the wall. We try to piece together what their culture was, their purpose. Those hieroglyphs are our window into that culture. Little images of daily activities, or athletics, or whatever.' YouTube, he reckons, is the image bank of our civilisation, 'a reality vault'. He imagines people one or two thousand years from now treating it like ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. 'It's basically the inventory of who we are. All our mundane and insane dreams, collected. Things we're interested in and things we found funny. Especially as a lot of YouTube seems to be diaries or weird confession-booth stuff. It's so sad to me, but beautiful too. At the end of the day this is what people seem to need. That's what they want to leave behind.'

YouTube is almost like a new continent that suddenly emerged only half a decade ago, rising out of the data sea. This New World keeps getting larger as more and more culture stuff gets stuffed into it: imagery and information, audio and video from every corner of the globe and every crevice of our past, and increasingly from the pasts of all those foreign cultures as well. This retro-exotica is already drastically expanding the horizons of influence for contemporary bands. For instance, on Ariel Pink's *Before Today*, 'Reminiscences' is an instrumental cover of an eighties Ethiopian pop song. Sung by Yeshimebet Dubale, the original can be found, alongside other low-budget videos made covertly

during the Derg military dictatorship, on a YouTube channel with the inadvertently amusing title DireTube.

The crucial point about the journeys through time that YouTube and the Internet in general enable is that people are not really going *backwards* at all. They are going *sideways*, moving laterally within an archival plane of space–time. In a very real sense, a YouTube sequence from some 1971 Latvian light-entertainment show – girls in hot pants dancing to what sounds like an ersatz Soviet version of the Tom Jones sound – exists *in the same space* as a this-minute YouTube clip of black Chicagoan teenage dancers doing bizarre footwork to the high-speed electronic rhythms of 'juke'. The Internet places the remote past and the exotic present side by side. Equally accessible, they become the same thing: far, yet near . . . old yet *now*.