

Essay

Phantom Television: Media Rupture and the Persistence of Experience

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Abstract

This article examines the persistence of television in a media environment increasingly defined by digital computation. It argues that television cannot be understood simply as a visual medium in continuity with cinema but must be situated within a specific video-electronic regime grounded in real-time transmission. Through a genealogical comparison of photochemical, video-electronic, and digital image regimes, the article analyzes how different technical configurations organize the relation between image, time, signal, and experience. It then considers historical and theoretical moments in which these regimes enter into tension, from early reconstructed actualities to live television, videotape, transmedia storytelling, and contemporary digital interfaces. Drawing on media archaeology and media theory, the article suggests that what persists under the name of television today is not necessarily the medium in its strict technical sense but a residual mode of engagement shaped by inherited perceptual and cultural habits. The article concludes that the apparent continuity of television in the digital mediascape should be read less as simple adaptation than as a symptom of a deeper rupture between technical regimes and lived experience.

Keywords: television; video-electronic media; media archaeology; digital media; media experience; transmedia storytelling; platformization

“Unlike film, there were no dreams of television prior to its development. In 1880, when the British humor magazine *Punch* published a caricature showing people watching television in the future, the principle underlying the technology had already been fixed.”

—Kittler (2012, pp. 207–208)



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1. Introduction

Video-electronic technology represents a radical rupture with the technologies that preceded it. In fact, thanks to this new technology, humanity experienced, at a collective level, a technical situation in which it became possible to see, at a distance, an event occurring simultaneously. This possibility is explicitly inscribed in the very etymology of the term *tele-vision*. Once this capacity was popularized and made accessible to a large part of society, it gradually became clear that video-electronic technology implied a different logic for understanding technology itself. The traditional conception of technology as an extension of the human body was no longer sufficient.

Breaking with the traditional understanding that sees technology as an extension of the senses, McLuhan identifies telegraphy and electric media as actual externalizations of the central nervous system. [McLuhan \(1964\)](#) writes:

After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media. (p. 19)

McLuhan pinpoints a new human condition characterized by the externalization of being, and from his analysis, the idea emerges that the development of television was a necessity within a context governed by electric technology. The underlying logic of video-electronic technology could already be perceived in the technical discourse through which the telephone emerged in 1876. Bell's invention was conceived as an apparatus based on a detailed study of the ear and designed to transmit "vocal or other sounds telegraphically" by means of electrical undulations analogous to acoustic vibrations. Yet latent in this operation was the idea of an apparatus capable not only of transmitting sound but also of extending perception itself and, ultimately, of transmitting images at a distance. Consider, for instance, Bell and Tainter's development of the photophone, only four years after the introduction of the telephone. This makes the continuity particularly evident, since it was a device that sought to produce and reproduce sound through light.

However, during the same period, another solution to the need for a technological device capable of producing moving images evolved independently. This time, the solution was grounded in photochemical inscription. As noted by Siegfried Zielinski, although "it is almost impossible to separate the two projects of cinema and television, [...] the intrinsic targets of the projects were poles apart and seemed to run parallel to one another without direct contact" (Zielinski, 1999, p. 50).

The photochemical process, culminating in the Lumière brothers' *cinématograph*, was grounded in spatial inscription. In fact, the Lumière invention consisted essentially of the development of a projection mechanism through which photographic images, fixed on a material support, could be serialized to simulate movement. Video-electronic technology, by contrast, was constructed in time, not through the storage of images, but through their continuous transmission in real time, since its essence lay in tele-vision: that is, in vision at a distance, or, to use the formula given in Nipkow's early television patent specifications, "[...] to make an object at location A visible at any location B" (Kittler, 2012, p. 209).

Whereas the photochemical process dealt with storage, indexicality, and the spatial decomposition of movement into a series of frames, video-electronic technology was concerned with the development of systems capable of transmitting an event in real time to a subject absent from the site of its occurrence. It is for this reason that authors such as Friedrich Kittler insist on separating these two genealogies, to the point of arguing that television, in contrast to film, does not belong to the regime of optics but to that of electronic signal processing (Kittler, 2012, p. 226).

This division takes a concrete form once one begins to analyze the very nature of the image produced by these two technologies. Photochemical media came to be understood as representative media par excellence, insofar as they present again—re-present—an object that has already been inscribed and preserved (Bazin, 2008, p. 14). This is why the photochemical process has traditionally been understood as a process of image production in the strict sense implied by the Western etymology of the term: it fulfills the semantic field of the Latin *imago*, since it imitates and substitutes something present for something absent, and it also corresponds to the Greek *eikōn*, historically associated with the logic of the shadow (*skia*), that is, an image produced by light. The technical possibility, developed

by Nicéphore Niépce and implemented by Louis Daguerre, of writing with light—*phōtós* + *graphé*—thus allows the object, through its shadow, to leave a trace. Roland Barthes pushes this logic to the point of comparing photographic portraiture to a kind of surgical operation, identifying in the photographic process an extraordinary force of reification capable even of transforming a subject into an object through its shadow (Barthes, 1980).

The video-electronic signal, by contrast, is fundamentally temporal: rather than storing movement as a trace, it processes it as it unfolds, making the image coincide with the event itself. In Wolfgang Ernst's words, "[i]n contrast to the projection of stored images, the genuinely 'live' television system requires a tightly coupled time relation between the sender and the receiver of the image" (Ernst, 2016, p. 128). This simultaneity, however, does not operate at the level of perception alone, but it is produced through microtemporal synchronization processes unfolding at scales inaccessible to phenomenological experience. The event is thus no longer encountered directly by the subject but through technical operations that reorganize perception prior to conscious experience (Ernst, 2016). Furthermore, in video-electronic technology, optical input is continuously translated into electrical signals. The image, resulting from processes of scanning and signal modulation, does not derive from a past contact between light and matter but emerges from the very operations that process and transmit the signal. This is the reason why video is not considered a medium of representation but one of presentation: the image does not function as the reproduction of a stable object but as a technical image whose visibility is produced through the operations of an apparatus that translates, modulates, and renders signals perceptible (Couchot, 1989; Flusser, 2011; Spielmann, 2005, pp. 55–56).

What the camera selects is therefore not preserved as a trace but initiates a temporal process, a set of transformations, or, as Engell describes it, a continuum in which elements cannot just continue to exist.¹ At the same time, video-electronic technology is able to transform every input into an image, including acoustic inputs. Consider, for instance, Steina Vasulka's *Violin Power* (1978), an oeuvre in which the musical instrument becomes an image-generating tool that creates abstract visual transpositions of vibrations (Sturken, 1995).

These deep differences lead us to posit that the genealogy of television can be situated closer to Guglielmo Marconi than to Nicéphore Niépce. In fact, television develops primarily within a lineage of transmission rather than one of inscription and cannot be understood independently of radio technologies and the broadcasting of voice and music (Kittler, 2012, p. 33). Consequently, the essence of television should be identified in the real-time transmission of images occurring elsewhere. Only with the introduction of recording did this logic begin to shift, as the signal could be detached from its temporal immediacy.

An important difference emerges at the etymological level between the two technologies that shaped much of the twentieth century. On the one hand, as noted above, the term television developed within a semantic field that emphasizes the possibility of seeing at a distance—that is, the transmission of an event in real time across space. On the other hand, perhaps already captivated by the novelty of photographic images arranged in rapid succession to produce the impression of fluid movement, the inventors of the medium situated the terms *cinématograph*, *cinema*, or *kino* within a semantic field centered on movement, the writing or recording of motion.²

While television literally names the possibility of seeing at a distance, cinema designates both the perception of movement and the preservation of movement as a temporal sequence. The cinematic image retains the trace of an event whose original *here and now* has already passed, making possible a form of deferred vision. Conversely, if television were described according to the semantic logic that governs cinema, it could appear simply as another technology of moving images, a kind of "electro-cinema." Yet this would

risk missing its defining characteristic. Television certainly produces a flux perceived as moving images, but its specificity lies elsewhere. It is a system of electronic transmission through which an event unfolding elsewhere becomes visible in real time. Unlike cinema, which preserves the trace of a past moment, television shares the present.

This difference in the genealogy of the two visual media—television and film—was recognized institutionally from the outset. From its earliest regulatory frameworks, television was not conceived as a cinematic medium but as a development within the technical and legal regime of radio. In the United States, as well as in European countries, state legislation and broadcasting authorities classified television within the same legal and technical regime governing radio transmission, thereby situating it within the domain of electrical communication and the real-time dissemination of events (Barbier & Bertho Lavenir, 1996, p. 134). Only retrospectively, under the cultural and theoretical dominance of cinematography, was television reinterpreted as a derivative or diminished form of cinema—consider, for example, the expression “the small screen”—a reinterpretation that obscured its specificity as a medium of real-time transmission.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the development of videotape radically transformed the original logic of television. By enabling recording and storage, video-electronic technology partially abandoned its condition of pure temporality and acquired a spatial dimension structured by selection and accumulation—one proper to the archival logic of film. Moreover, as videotape became an accessible and widely used technology, users were able to assemble fragments of broadcast flow into personal archives, producing narrative sequences through acts of storage and retrieval. As remarked by Sean Cubitt, “The domestic video cassette recorder (VCR) is itself a kind of production device, as it can be for seizing moments from TV’s incessant flow, compiling, crash editing” (Cubitt, 1991, p. 4).

The introduction of videotape thus produced a denaturation of television, giving rise to a database logic governed by spatial organization. As a result, television ceased to function exclusively as transmission and began to operate according to principles of inscription and archival structuring historically associated with other media. The fact that such storage had previously required film—used externally for advertising, stock footage, or delayed broadcast—underscores how foreign the concept of inscription was to television’s original technical logic.

This progressive detachment from the logic of transmission could already be observed in earlier forms of broadcasting, particularly in what Raymond Williams famously described as the “flow” of television. For Williams (2003), television is not experienced as a sequence of discrete programs but as a continuous stream in which heterogeneous elements—films, advertisements, trailers, and announcements—are organized into an unbroken sequence (Williams, 2003, pp. 91–93). Yet this description also seems to reveal a structural tension. The continuity of flow arises from the articulation of recurrent interruptions that render this continuity perceptible. Advertising, promotional inserts, and transitional signals—often produced in early broadcasting by filming a screen with a television camera—introduce a segmented logic that transforms the flux into an intelligible sequence. Interruptions introduce the asymmetry necessary for the flow to be perceived as such. As noted by Ernst, “the temporality of television does not lie simply in the seriality of its programs” (Ernst, 2016, p. 123), since television is, in this sense, time itself.

What Williams identifies as flow can be understood as a paradoxical construction. The apparent continuity of the televisual stream depends on elements that interrupt it. One might say that the flow becomes perceptible precisely at the point where temporal continuity encounters repetition and variation. The temporal continuity of electronic transmission is overlaid with structures belonging to media that are grounded in inscription, such as cinema and photography. Thus, the segmentation identified by Williams does not belong

to the original logic of video-electronic technology but emerges from its intersection with other technical forms and institutional practices. Flow, therefore, might be better understood as a perceptual effect produced by the relation between heterogeneous temporalities.

This paradox can be further illuminated through McLuhan's distinction between mechanical and electric media. As McLuhan notes, electric media operate through simultaneity and configuration, which he famously describes through the notion of "mosaic." Nevertheless, they are often perceived through inherited patterns of linear and segmented thought. In this sense, Williams's notion of flow might be understood as a perceptual effect arising from the coexistence of these two regimes, or, in McLuhan's words, as the result of the fact that "we live mythically but continue to think fragmentarily and on single planes" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 39).

2. Genealogy of Three Image Regimes

Cinema, television, and, later, digital media do not belong to a single evolutionary line but to distinct technical and ontological configurations that organize the relation between image, time, and signal differently. The persistence of television today becomes problematic precisely because these differences are often obscured by the apparent continuity of screens, formats, and viewing habits. Over the course of the last century, these three technologies have shaped the social imaginary on a global scale, and they can be understood as three regimes whose technical, temporal, and experiential principles are irreducible to one another. These are a photochemical regime grounded in inscription and trace; a video-electronic regime structured around real-time transmission; and, most recently, a digital regime defined by computation, storage, and the manipulation of data. Flusser's (2011) notion of technical images helps clarify what is at stake in this distinction, since it shifts the problem of the image from representation toward the apparatuses and operations through which images are technically produced. Although these regimes historically overlap and are subject to hybridizing processes of remediation, each maintains a specific logic that cannot be fully subsumed under the others.

There is little doubt that the first half of the twentieth century was shaped, to a large extent, by the consolidation of the photochemical regime (Panofsky, 1974). Emerging in the final years of the nineteenth century, cinema only acquired its full social significance when it became a collective practice. Devices such as Edison's Kinetoscope had already demonstrated the possibility of photographic moving images, yet confined them to an individual mode of reception. It was with the projection system developed by the Lumière brothers that cinema established itself as a shared experience, and it is this collective dimension that would come to define its cultural and social impact (Sadoul, 1973).

The second half of the same century was definitively marked by the consolidation of the video-electronic regime and, by extension, by mass-media telecommunications. Unlike cinema, which, as just noted, acquired its social dimension by implementing a collective social practice taking place in public space, television exerted the opposite effect on the individual by introducing the external world into the private sphere of the house. As noted by John Ellis, "TV confirms the domestic isolation of the viewer, and invites the viewer to regard the world from that position. The viewer is therefore confirmed in a basic division of the world between the 'inside' of the home, the family and the domestic, and the 'outside' of the work, politics, public life, the city, the crowd" (Ellis, 1993, p. 166).

The irruption of the continuous flux of information into the domestic sphere was critically staged by Martha Rosler in *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967–1972). The work deals with the moment in which images from the Vietnam War enter the space of everyday life and coexist, as Rosler says, with routine gestures like an evening family meal.

A banal domestic act, like lifting a curtain, exposes the war as a distant spectacle, quietly consumed within the passivity of the home (Museum of Modern Art, n.d.).

Rosler's images depict what John Ellis and Jürgen Habermas describe in their respective analyses of the effects that mass media communication technologies, above all television, have on the citizen, who is progressively transformed into a passive consumer living in a kind of simulated public sphere, a public space that overlaps with the domestic space and that, as Habermas notes, "assumes advertising functions" and acquires pseudo-privatized traits (Habermas, 1991, p. 175).

While Habermas sees in the pseudo-privatized public sphere the mutation of citizens' subjectivity—from one formed through reading and private exchange of ideas to one shaped by the consumption of culture—Ellis instead points to a force of individual isolation. For Ellis, the public sphere acts upon the private one, absorbing it and compelling the individual to encounter the public sphere from within the comfort of the domestic space. However, converging with Habermas's view, Ellis suggests that the public sphere is increasingly transformed into an object of private consumption (Ellis, 1993).

What emerges from both analyses is the formation of a citizen enclosed within an already invaded private sphere, with a diminished critical capacity, or, as Ellis describes, a viewer who perceives the outside world from a "position of impotence" (Ellis, 1993, p. 170). The sense of impotence seems to be illustrated in Rosler's collages, where subjects appear as passive witnesses to the atrocities of the Vietnam War. In this regard, McLuhan goes further by describing this "impotence" as a *rigor mortis of the political body*, which seems unable to act or address important social issues (McLuhan, 1964, p. 270).

Despite the apparent consensus regarding the effects of television on the individual, such agreement was far from uniform. It begins to fracture precisely at the level of the narrative, where certain features of live television suggest forms of openness that challenge the notion of a passive individual, of a passive viewer. Umberto Eco identifies a series of characteristics that would encourage the viewer to abandon a purely passive behavior.

While Ellis, Habermas, and Williams, from their respective sociological and technical perspectives, each interpret television as a force that imposes passivity and impotence, Eco introduces an aesthetic and narrative lens, identifying in live television a vector of collaboration and activity that reconfigures the viewer as an active participant in the production of meaning. Through the notion of *apertura*, Eco describes a series of transformations in the way narrative structures are organized.

Observing a dissolution of the plot (*dissoluzione dell'intreccio*) in contemporary narratives, Eco describes a shift away from the linear and causal model that had defined classical narrative since Aristotelian poetics and toward configurations structured as fields of possibilities rather than closed and linear sequences of events. In Eco's hypothesis, the viewer is no longer positioned as a passive receiver of pre-established meaning but as an active agent whose trajectory through these possibilities contributes to the production of sense. It is possible to see in Eco's concept of *apertura* the groundwork for a transformation that, in the context of digital media, would later redefine the viewer as a *viewer*, that is, a subject whose navigations actively generate the narrative itself (Duarte, 2017).

For Eco, live television places the viewer before a series of non-essential narrative acts: events in which nothing happens—that is, elements traditionally excluded from the diegesis through ellipsis. Live television brings these elements into the narrative as a contingent flux, forcing the viewer toward a more active position. At the same time, it obliges the director to develop an impromptu narrative composition in which montage takes place simultaneously with the unfolding action (Eco, 2006, p. 194). Editing is thus produced through the coordination of multiple cameras in real time, breaking with the traditional narrative

model based on *causal chains* and establishing instead a field of *contingent events* that the viewer must navigate by connecting elements and producing meaning (Eco, 2006, p. 199).

Eco's theory could only take root within the new nature of the video-electronic image, especially in its original form as live television. As already noted, television does not place the viewer before a closed and stable image, as in the photochemical regime. In television, the image exists only through a fragile and highly complex process of technical synchronization. Consequently, televisual narrative cannot be confined in the same way. What Eco perceives aesthetically as *apertura* may thus be understood as the narrative expression of this technical condition, which manifests itself as an open diegesis that incorporates, *in praesentia*, elements traditionally excluded from the plot and relegated to *absentia*.

As we can see, live television generates a fundamental incompatibility in the ways Western culture has theorized and understood the narrative act. Contrary to the Aristotelian conception of plot as a linear sequence of narrative elements organized according to specific rules, in Eco's analysis of live television, a rupture with this traditional view emerges. A *flâneur*-like viewer—or what we might call a *viewer*—emerges as the plot, in its Aristotelian sense, begins to dissolve. The passivity implied by the linearity of the plot gives way once live television, unable to offer a closed and predictable narrative structure, compels the viewer to enter the narrative process. In this sense, Eco (2006) suggests that such conditions oblige the individual to reclaim the autonomy that mass media had eroded during the first half of the twentieth century.

Paradoxically, television, which was the very medium most often understood as producing passivity in the individual, also anticipates the emergence of a subject whose cognition depends on an active engagement with the narratives through which the world is apprehended. The mediascape of the immediate future of live television is evidence of a growing need to interact with narrative forms. It consequently anticipates the development of technologies that would later materialize forms of interaction which, in Eco's hypothesis, still appeared only as allusions to a potential actual interaction with an ergodic narrative form. However, Eco's notion of *apertura* still presupposes a subject capable of organizing contingencies within the horizon of lived temporal experience, that is, within a temporality still available to perception and interpretation. The digital regime, by contrast, transforms the organization of experience toward microtemporal operations inaccessible to conscious perception (Ernst, 2016).

Once the private sphere of the house had been invaded and adapted to this form of permeation of information, the house started to be, in some way, externalized into the public sphere. As remarked by Caronia (2022), in the age of television, information appears to emerge within the domestic space itself via telephone, radio, television, and then computer. This process generates a progressive "domestication" (*addomesticamento*) of media, coupled with a gradual "mediatization" (*mediatizzazione*) of the home, both unfolding through a reciprocal adaptation. As a result, while the outside world is folded into the domestic space in the form of international flows, the interior of the home can, in turn, project itself outward into the world (Caronia, 2022, p. 96). In other words, to use McLuhan's famous sentence, "In the electric age we wear all mankind as our skin" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 56).

Subjected to the externalization of the central nervous system, humankind of the video-electronic age is compelled to navigate the continuous flux of information circulating across diverse media and social spaces. The cognitive activity that emerges under these conditions no longer corresponds either to the fragmentation and linearity of the photochemical process or to the video-electronic regime defined by the synchronization of event and reception. The emergence of digital media introduces a third configuration that cannot be reduced to either inscription or transmission but responds instead to the need to

navigate large fields of heterogeneous elements, allowing for the manipulation and reconfiguration of meaning through acts of selection and access (Manovich, 2001, pp. 27–48).

Within this technological context, the image is produced through a set of operations performed on data structures, and consequently, it becomes a field that is structured to be accessed. The digital image does not depend on the past presence of an object, as in the photochemical regime, nor on the present unfolding of an event, as in the video-electronic regime embodied by television, but on the execution of processes that may combine capture, simulation, and generation. Whether derived from a sensor, constructed through algorithmic procedures, or produced by neural networks, the image becomes fundamentally manipulable and detachable from any stable referent. Here, Flusser's (2011) claim that technical images are not representations of objects but computations of concepts becomes especially relevant: the digital image appears as a visible surface only because it has first been calculated, programmed, and assembled from data (p. 33).

It is at this point that the persistence of the word “television” becomes problematic. What is now displayed on devices that still resemble the former cathode-ray tube no longer belongs to the televisual regime in the strict sense, even if it continues to circulate culturally, industrially, and domestically under the name of television. It belongs to a computational regime that emerged alongside and in contradiction to the logic of real-time transmission. What persists today under the name of television is therefore not a medium in the strict sense but a residual mode of engagement. This discrepancy between technical displacement and experiential persistence is what the concept of phantom television seeks to name.

Recent studies of video streaming and online television help to clarify the contemporary form of this displacement. Netflix, for instance, does not simply distribute televisual content through a new channel; it reorganizes the conditions under which such content is produced, circulated, accessed, and consumed. Its logic is no longer that of the broadcast schedule but of the catalog, the interface, recommendations, on-demand access, and subscriber retention (Jenner, 2023; Lobato, 2019; Lotz, 2022). In this sense, streaming does not simply extend television into a new environment; it reorganizes the televisual experience around serialized storytelling, global distribution, catalog-based access, recommendation systems, and on-demand practices (Lotz & Lobato, 2023).

At the same time, this transformation requires understanding platforms not merely as distribution channels but as techno-cultural environments that determine connectivity, visibility, and access (van Dijck, 2013). In this context, the audiovisual object is inseparable from software operations that store, retrieve, rank, and render it visible and accessible. The televisual experience that appears on the interface is therefore shaped by programmed forms of memory and access, rather than by the continuous temporality of broadcast transmission (Chun, 2011).

This can be observed in the standard practices of streaming services. Netflix preserves elements historically associated with television—seriality, episodic continuity, domestic viewing, and the organization of attention around recurrent audiovisual forms—but detaches them from the logic of the broadcast schedule through autoplay, recommendation systems, full-season release strategies, “continue watching” queues, and catalog-based access. Live streaming services similarly preserve the cultural value of liveness in sports broadcasts, breaking-news coverage, concerts, and platform-specific live events, while relocating it within infrastructures organized by latency, interface design, live chat, metrics, notifications, and data capture. Smart TVs and connected devices intensify this ambiguity since the domestic screen still appears as a television set, but its home screen is organized through apps, thumbnails, rankings, previews, recently watched items, and algorithmic suggestions rather than through a continuous broadcast flow.

Detached from its original technical conditions, television survives as a collective habit. The shared perception of television is no more than a way of encountering images that subjects still experience as if they were unfolding in time, even when they are in fact stored, segmented, and increasingly navigable. At the same time, these images do not belong to the photochemical regime; they are no longer traces of objects inscribed on a material support. In this sense, contemporary television may be understood as a kind of zombie performance: a practice that continues to be collectively enacted despite the disappearance of the technical conditions that once made it possible.³

3. Tensions

On 26 April 1898, *L'explosion du Cuirassé Maine* was screened at the Théâtre Robert-Houdin in Paris. During the Cuban conflict, correspondents made extensive use of the telegraph and cable systems to transmit information, establishing a form of near-instant communication. This technical infrastructure converged with an unprecedented media campaign driven by the yellow press, which sought to produce immediacy in its political and collective emotional effects (Mattelart, 1997). Georges Méliès, the author of the film, was certainly not aiming at such political effects. However, the significance of his experiment may be understood as marking the beginning of a collective “bulimia” of images as information and, more importantly, the pursuit of immediacy through moving images.

The chronology of events seems to mark a precise moment in which two different regimes entered into tension. In 1897, Cuba was still under Spanish rule, despite the United States having growing economic interests on the island. On 15 February 1898, the *USS Maine* exploded in the harbor of Havana, causing the death of more than 260 people, triggering the Spanish–American War. While the American government accused Spain of the attack, Spanish authorities claimed it had been an accident. On 23 April 1898, Spain declared war on the United States in what would later be described, and not in Spain’s favor, as a “splendid little war,” due to its brevity and limited military cost, yet with far-reaching geopolitical consequences. Three days later, George Méliès screened his film, *L'explosion du cuirassé Maine*, at the Théâtre Robert-Houdin in Paris.

While grounded in the photochemical logic of inscription, Méliès’ film appears to respond to a demand for immediacy already structured by telegraphic communication. This tension pushes the film to operate according to a logic closer to that of a news dispatch than to that of cinematic representation. Above all, it attempts to translate into moving images a regime of transmission that cinema itself could not technically achieve. In other words, Méliès exposes the need for images within the immediacy proper to electric transmission—a demand shaped by the widespread use of telegraphy and the installation of interoceanic cables in the nineteenth century (Barbier & Bertho Lavenir, 1996)—but one whose visual dimension had not yet been technically developed. In this sense, his reconstructed actualities reveal a tension between two incompatible regimes.

A similar tension re-emerged with the popularization of digital technology. This time, however, it no longer revolved around the opposition between inscription and transmission but involved three regimes: inscription, transmission, and navigable structures. Yet the dematerializing force set in motion by digital media tends to render this tension partially imperceptible, as it is displaced into the transmedia synergies that redistribute both content and the mechanisms of the creation of meaning across the mediascape.

The rapid expansion of transmedia storytelling during this period represents, as noted by Henry Jenkins, a narrative proliferation that integrates multiple texts into “a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 95). The very same transmedia dynamics, however, ended up obscuring and normalizing the underlying tension between the three regimes. In fact, as narratives unfold across platforms,

adapting to the affordances of each medium, inscription, transmission, and navigation become intertwined to the point of apparent continuity. Through transmedia processes, the tension between regimes becomes partially dissolved within the experience of the subject who mediates their interaction with the mediascape through a single media machine capable of configuring multiple interfaces belonging to different cultural technologies and technological regimes (Manovich, 2001).

It is in this sense that what has often been understood as the core logic of remediation appears within the digital regime as something more radical and unprecedented. Rather than simply incorporating or refashioning earlier media forms, digital technologies simulate their continuity while simultaneously dissolving the material conditions that once grounded them. Seen through the lens of Stiegler's (2008) concept of *redoublement*, the processes of adaptation and reappropriation through which subjects respond to the transformation of the technological dispositive become the consequence of an irremediable and irreversible rupture within previously stabilized forms of collective experience. Méliès's dilemma represents such a rupture, insofar as it reveals the incompatibility between a regime grounded in photochemical inscription and the growing collective need for immediacy generated by the development of electrical transmission.

For Stiegler, such moments of technical mutation generate a form of collective disorientation that unfolds in two phases. The first consists of an interruption of existing cultural programming; the second, a process of reappropriation through which subjects gradually elaborate new forms of experience and social organization. This second phase corresponds, at least partially, to what has been described as remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). Yet the digital regime seems to complicate this model.

Earlier technological ruptures exposed the incompatibilities between regimes in a visible manner. It is sufficient to think of how each medium imposed distinct affordances and modes of experience. Digital technologies, by contrast, tend to conceal such incompatibilities through interface operations that simulate reality and obscure their own media function (Galloway, 2012). The transmedia organization of contemporary media experience, together with the capacity of digital interfaces to reproduce the appearance of earlier media forms, generates an impression of continuity that partially obscures the depth of the rupture taking place at the infrastructural level, that is, the separation between inherited modes of experience and the technical operations that now sustain them.

In a manner comparable to phantom limb syndrome, digital technology succeeds in distorting the perception of this violent rupture, leading contemporary subjects to relate to media forms as if their technical conditions had remained fundamentally stable. In this way, the amputation itself becomes partially imperceptible, allowing television to still be experienced as television, cinema as cinema, and hypertext as text within the contemporary mediascape, despite the regimes sustaining these practices having been profoundly transformed. What persists is therefore not the continuity of a medium in the strict sense but the persistence of inherited perceptual and cultural habits within an environment that no longer corresponds to the technical conditions from which those habits originally emerged.

From this perspective, Francesco Casetti's notion of the relocation and reconfiguration of media experience appears relevant (Casetti, 2015). However, rather than interpreting this continuity as the successful adaptation of media forms to new environments, it may be necessary to understand it as the effect of a deeper discrepancy between technical regimes and the way in which the subject continues to experience them.

In this sense, much as with phantom limb syndrome, the sensation of apparent continuity—the persistence of an affordance or mode of experience despite the disappearance of its material and temporal basis—does not indicate that the amputation or the rupture between regimes does not exist. On the contrary, this syndrome may instead reveal

the success of the digital regime in simulating continuity despite the dissolution of the material and temporal conditions that once grounded those experiences.

This process may therefore be understood as a form of metaphorical disguise through which the digital regime simulates the persistence of earlier media conditions while concealing the depth of the underlying amputation (Parikka & Ernst, 2013). In this sense, contemporary experience is structured precisely through the masking of a fundamental rupture, a condition that resonates with Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's analysis in *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Chun, 2016).

The digital regime can be interpreted as generating a failed *redoublement*, not because reappropriation does not occur, but because the perception of rupture is itself absorbed by simulations of continuity. By concealing the amputation through simulations of continuity, the subject becomes unable to fully enter into the second phase described by Stiegler, that is, the process of reappropriation, through which a new collective organization of experience emerges. The phantom sensation attenuates the perception of rupture by preserving the impression of phenomenological continuity despite the disappearance of the conditions that originally sustained it. Thus, where Casetti (2015) identifies processes of continuity and re-configuration, one might instead be confronted with the symptoms of a failed redoublement.

In this sense, digital simulation does not remediate the amputation; it anesthetizes it. The apparent continuity of televisual and cinematic experience could therefore be understood as a narcotized perception of rupture in the sense described by McLuhan, a perceptual condition in which technical discontinuity is not absent but rendered difficult to experience as such. What persists today is no longer the shared temporality of transmission or the historical trace of photochemical inscription but a spectral persistence generated through computational operations unfolding beyond phenomenological temporality.

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Notes

- ¹ Engell (1999, p. 470) describes this characteristic as elements that “Nicht-einfach-vorhanden-bleiben-können” —that is, elements that just cannot continue to exist.
- ² In this regard, it is important to note that the relative homogeneity across Western languages in naming cinema derives largely from the notion of movement (*kinesis*), with some exceptions, such as the Swedish *biograph*, which foregrounds life (*bios*). By contrast, in East Asian languages, cinema is often designated through terms that emphasize the mode of appearance of the image, whether as shadow, or projection. The Chinese *diànyǐng* (电影), literally “electric shadow”, exemplifies this tendency. As Shu-mei Shih shows, many such terms emerged through processes of translation and retranslation from English and French, often mediated by Japanese, where Chinese characters were used to render Western concepts that were later reintroduced into Chinese (Shih, 2001).
- ³ It is important to recall in this context the process of analog switch-off implemented across many countries, through which analog terrestrial broadcasting was discontinued in favor of digital transmission systems (Cave & Nakamura, 2006). While electromagnetic transmission persists, this transition effectively dissolved the technical regime that once grounded the experience of television as continuous broadcast flow, marking a shift from scheduled programming toward forms of access based on selection and retrieval (Lotz, 2022). At the same time, analog switch-off entailed a retooling of the underlying infrastructure, eliminating the material conditions that had historically sustained television as a temporally continuous experience, and replacing them with digital and networked systems centered on smart terminals. This transformation, as Hayashi (2006) suggests, signals a paradigmatic shift in what television is.

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