

Digitizing My Library: Reflections on VHS and Television Collecting in the Digital Age

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With the widespread availability of VCRs by the 1980s and 1990s, a growing subculture of collectors and tape-traders stretched transnationally and across media fandom communities. For collectors/traders, the notion of ‘saving’ televised moments and programs to keep and to share became imbued with dual ideas of retaining (for enjoyment) and rescuing (from cultural erasure). The impermanence of the television signal is an obstacle that preservation-minded fans confronted resourcefully over the decades, individually and collectively, using assorted recording technologies at their disposal (in some cases, even resorting to home-movie cameras, audio recorders, or simply 35mm cameras pointed at the TV set). Writing previously on this subject during the twilight of the VCR era, I argued that for collectors the maintenance of a TV library was compelled in no small part by a pursuit of materiality, and pleasures of possession that were often as much tactile as conceptual. At that time, I theorized the motivations of serious video collectors as a set of layered identifications that included such roles as curator, cataloguer, captor, and creator, among others. Today, the fan-as-captor must contend with new digital barriers to downloading, circulating, and possessing the text. Meanwhile, those of us still intent on holding on to televised material do so with no guarantees that selected digital formats will endure.

While converting my collection of over 150 boxes of VHS tapes and DVD-Rs since 2016 (year of the last manufactured VCR), I began hearing from fans and scholars wrestling with whether (when, how) to digitize or discard bulky videotapes. Digitizing provokes a fundamental reconceiving of the archive and entails experimentation with translating the physical collection into data points, such as spreadsheet rows and columns. For fans who once took pride in generating shelves of neatly labeled video spines on display, and even large-scale collectors who long maintained meticulous computer catalogues as maps to their archives, transitioning to an entirely digital archive alters the aims of record-keeping. A UK weblog titled “VHiStory Project” beautifully narrativizes its author’s gradual digitization progress, excavating cultural memory tape by numbered tape with careful attention to broadcast segments, ads, and other “continuity stuff,” annotated with such remarks as, “The recording stops during this programme” (<https://vhistory.wordpress.com/about>, <https://vhistory.wordpress.com/2016/07/14/clive-anderson-talks-back-tape-1340/>). My own process dominated my living space and schedule for two years and thrust me into meditation on the implications of such a project, balancing promises of release and re-creation with sentiments of loss and futility.

Mindful of the increasing immateriality and shifting meanings of the ‘TV collection,’ several lines of inquiry intrigue me. First, what meanings do degrading/disappearing tape libraries hold today for those who possess(ed) them, and how does the labor of

digitizing call these meanings into being? Second, when digitizing a videotape to extract and catalogue its contents, what counts as the recorded 'text' to be saved? Third, approaching recorded VHS as personal and cultural artifact, what lingering significance do these objects hold as a perishing record of the fan-viewer's relationship to television as a transient medium? While there was never a uniform practice that defined the experience of television video collecting, these interlocking questions aim to reinterrogate videotape, for all its extinct-ness, as a historically vibrant site of meaning-making, textuality and flow.

Walter Benjamin's essay "Unpacking My Library" (1931) poetically characterized the act of book collecting in terms of a felt investment and intimacy with the objects. A similar claim holds for tape-traders as gatherer-guardians of rare texts. The videocassette accommodated any number of purposes, from vehicle for assembling clips or series, to practical tool for place- or time-shifting, to chaotic canvas for indulging real-time channel surfing habits and spontaneous recording impulses or calculated clip hunting. My early junk tapes—hardest to part with—are an unruly mishmash packed with multiple attempts to catch desired music videos, ads, promos, and interviews, interrupted by comedy fragments in a juggling act of channels. Hodgepodge tapes contain over 100 discrete items in various states of incompleteness, and bear the scars of control breaks and costly tape splicing. Whether their status now is keepsake or garbage, these artifacts not only testify to a forgotten intimacy and agency afforded by the VHS medium, but also yield an uncanny kind of televisual flow all their own. By contrast, a more orderly set of off-air episodes of a revered show like *Hill Street Blues* with original commercials may hold enduring value for the viewer who diligently recorded then stored them for over thirty years, as well as TV scholars. It became a common fan practice, however, when compiling episodes sequentially, to edit out ads to facilitate uninterrupted immersion in a favorite program. If eventually made redundant by commercially released box sets, such dub tapes retain nostalgic value at best (One collector I first interviewed in 1999 recently purged half her haul with mild regrets, relieved to reclaim a room.). Arguably, low-quality recordings of assorted program pieces accumulated by surfer-scavengers have negligible worth as salvageable content (is the six-hour tape itself the 'text?'), yet these, too, are potentially imbued with a sense of autobiography as a slice of the viewer's interactive television experience. All of these categories, independent of their preservation-worthiness or textual bona fides, remain fascinatingly rich records of a vanishing VCR culture.