

The Museum Of Modern Art Video Viewpoints

May 14, 2001

Industrial Synthesis

Modernity, the period roughly spanning the mid 19th century to the present, has produced a vast body of linked and interrelated mass or popular culture, which is, in effect, an archive. This phenomenon is closely tied to the rise of time-based media, a formal and institutional history which includes still- and motion-picture film, the gramophone, the LP and the CD, TV and radio, animation, video, and the Internet.

Most recent of these as a popular medium, the Internet represents a different order of information technology altogether. Its interactive nature distinguishes it from traditional media's "total flow", which may well run 24 hours a day, yet may only be switched on or off. Moreover, the Internet is composed of disparate media previously available only in controlled broadcasts, or locked into discrete consumer objects such as videotapes and records. At least theoretically, then, the historical archive of pop culture becomes accessible, and, just as importantly, mutable: this is an opportunity not simply for preservation, but for re-circulation and recombination along new lines.

An archive like this allows for an experience of history that is quite personal. Consumer experience widens and flattens horizontally, following a slow shift from the old model of the pyramid to the new model of, say, the pancake. Media artifacts such as pop songs, furniture, logos, and advertisements, come to stand as headstones marking bygone eras, much like illuminated manuscripts or Victorian corsets.

The difference is that an item of the "just-past", as represented in our current digital archive, may have originated during the lived experience of the viewer. This produces the shock of the uncanny: this artifact is clearly the same as it always was, and yet it is also entirely different.

This shock is the registration of the recognition that any changes have actually occurred in the viewing subject, who is suddenly positioned as an archaeologist sifting through the strata of his or her own experience.

Items which produce this effect are the detritus of a society predicated on perpetual turnover and obsolescence, and this personal experience of lived history is an intimation of one's own mortality.

Seth Price