

Generation Loss: Bootlegs, Dubs, and Other Labours of Love

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Abstract

In his evocative essay *Embedded Memories*, Will Straw claims “the videocassette contains textual forms that are the expressive residues of more broadly-based cultural knowledges and aesthetic languages.” If, as Straw asserts, media is a vehicle of aesthetic languages, then how is its circulation leveraged semantically? In this paper, I pursue this question through two very different works which, on their own terms, provide insight into the prolific collisions that can occur between “format and feeling.” The first of these case studies is the Todd Haynes film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1988), a pseudo-biopic which has thrived as a bootleg commodity since its removal from circulation, sustaining material degradation with each successive dub. The second is artist Daniel Barrow’s *Winnipeg Babysitter: An Incomplete, Local History of 1980s Public Access Television* (2009), an archival-performance piece which assembles fragments of Winnipeg’s golden age of public access broadcasting. Although in different ways, both of these moving image works are inextricably tied up in the afterlife of the footage itself, and the potency embedded in the material inscriptions their unique histories have written onto the media. Tracing the effects of these material inflections, this project considers how the aesthetics of obsolescence contribute to a reading of both works.

Keywords: Analog, VHS, bootlegs, nostalgia, Public Access Television, Canadian history, digital humanities, memory

Introduction

Years ago, in the dingy laundry room of an apartment building I was living in, I stumbled upon an unmarked VHS cassette. I must have felt emboldened by curiosity, which won out against any conflicting hesitations, because I took the tape

upstairs and threw it on. The contents turned out to be a meticulously assembled collage of veteran MuchMusic VJ Erica Ehm, montaged into an impressive supercut. The shabby origins of the tape exuded the coveted and fast-fading routes of circulation, which compounded its value in my eyes (this was 2008 and digital platforms were still

in their infancy). In his evocative essay *Embedded Memories*, Will Straw claims “the videocassette contains textual forms that are the expressive residues of more broadly-based cultural knowledges and aesthetic languages.”¹ As such, the Ehm tape is a perfect storm of video culture, vernacular expression, and 80s Canadian televisuality. The “expressive residues” that surrounded it were of a culture that I had only known in the form of taped content, but that was legible to me despite this generational gap. I felt a doubled sense of nostalgia— first, for a spectral history that was readable to me but not mine, and second, for the materiality of media—as the shift towards digitality was already in motion and would preclude similar future encounters. If, as Straw asserts, media is a vehicle of aesthetic languages, then how is its circulation leveraged semantically?

I’m pursuing this question through two very different works which, on their own terms, provide insight into the prolific collisions that can occur between “format and feeling.”²

Todd Haynes’ film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1988) is mythologized for its retreat underground after encountering legal troubles in its initial legitimate run. In the years since, the film has acquired something of a cult status, attributable in part to Haynes’ innovative use of dolls as actors, not to mention its rarity and illegality. The film’s legacy offers a compelling illustration of the cumulative sensorial weight of circulation as a reflection of personal and

collective memory. Through an entirely different register, artist Daniel Barrow taps into these connections in his found footage project *Winnipeg Babysitter: An Incomplete, Local History of 1980s Public Access Television* (2009).

The intentions behind these works are very different, as is my relationship and approach to each of them, however they both encapsulate the potential of ephemeral media fragments to act as conductors into the present of bygone cultural climates.³ Interwoven between the form and content of both these works is an essence of nostalgia for the golden age of local access to broadcasting, for more authentic channels of transmission, for childhood, and even for an imagined wholesomeness evoked in the music of the Carpenters.

The Karen Carpenter Story (1988)

The excessive nature of the aura which occasionally surpasses the object in question is exemplified in *Superstar*.⁴ Karen Carpenter herself has also gained post-mortem status as a cult icon and tragic figure. Despite its reputation for irreverence, *Superstar* is actually quite earnest. The project began at Bard College, where both Haynes and collaborator Cynthia Schneider attended, both were fans of Karen Carpenter, who had recently passed away from complications of anorexia nervosa at 32 years old.⁵ Haynes describes his affection for The Carpenter’s music as emblematic of the myth of American normalcy, a mixture of “fakeness and fantasy” which reminded him of his Southern California

¹ Will Straw, “Embedded Memories,” in *Residual Media*, ed. Charles Acland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 7.

² Andrew Burke, *Hinterland Remixed: Media and Memory in the Canadian 1970s* (Montreal: McGill-Queens Press, 2019), 116.

³ Burke, *Hinterland Remixed*, 36.

⁴ I use aura in a quasi-Benjaminian sense here to refer to the heightened lore that accumulates around people and objects whose reputations precede and exceed themselves.

⁵ Glyn Davis, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008), 11.

upbringing.⁶ This is possibly the reason why Haynes chose to use Barbies in the place of actors, the dolls channeling the impossible standards of femininity that shades Karen's story. The film borrows generously from a variety of genres (PSA, after-school specials, and biopic most conspicuously) mixed into an amalgam of pastiche.⁷ The familiar structure of a music biopic is apparent, but Hayne's breaks up the generic rhythm with intertexts of 'live' footage, which provides context and exposition.⁸ Talking-head testimonials citing Karen's influence, PSA voiceovers describing anorexia in uncomfortably clinical terms, ostensibly spontaneous street interviews, and images culled from news and entertainment broadcasts punctuate the dramatized content. The narrative follows the ups and downs of Karen's struggle, emphasizing the compounding stressors of her allegedly controlling family and perfectionist collaborator/brother Richard.

Haynes shot the film on 16mm, but incorporates video via the found footage intertexts, which were captured by the director by simply aiming his camera at the television. Even this initial translation produces a certain texture in the film, with grainy footage of *The Partridge Family* and beauty pageants underlining the currency that amplified suburban normalcy held (for some) in the 1970s. Flickering scanlines, which mark the found footage excerpts, expose the intermedia translation and pre-empt the exponential generational loss the film would eventually undergo as a commodity bootleg.⁹ On a symbolic level, the loss also reveals the mediation between the footage and its index, causing a rift in the seamless veracity of that normalcy, and suggesting

that something dark lingers beyond the milquetoast veneer.¹⁰

Like many young women I have long been drawn to the figure of Karen Carpenter. During my experience with, and eventual hospitalization for, anorexia, I felt an exclusive claim to Karen, a claim that would be constantly punctured as I discovered the never-ending stream of reverence and retrospection that is directed at her. Contrary to my deep-seated instinct that I and I alone had access to the authentic Karen Carpenter, what I gravitated towards was the tragic aura which has stimulated so much of the obsession surrounding her. Ironically, *Superstar* came to occupy a similar space in cultural memory. After failing to obtain the rights to the music included in the film, Haynes decided to go forward anyhow. The film was screened at festivals and galleries, though both Mattel and Richard Carpenter issued cease and desists, eventually causing the film to be pulled from circulation, and begin its journey in the "underground economy of bootleg circulation."¹¹ Since then, the film has been officially banned from screening and distribution, though it is clear that this suppression has prolonged the cultural shelf life of the film itself and forged its path to infamy.

In the years since its botched release, *Superstar* has continued to circulate underground through dubbed VHS copies (the technology that made dubbing a home practice). Although it was originally shot on 16mm, this migration foregrounds the video medium as a central site of the film's history and relevance. Media scholar Daniel Herbert has written extensively about VHS culture, and speculates that the trend of dematerialization in media creates fetish objects

⁶ Ibid., 15.

⁷ Ibid., 43-44.

⁸ Ibid., 61-62

⁹ Generational loss refers to the diminished resolution as a result of copying tapes.

¹⁰ Lucas Hildebrand, "Grainy Days and Mondays: *Superstar* and Bootleg Aesthetics," *Camera Obscura* 19, no. 3 (2004): 58.

¹¹ Ibid., 58.

out of the more tactile relics.¹² Compounding this fetish is the film's banned status, with each dub forming a network of relations that elevates the viewer from a passive observer to that of an accomplice.¹³ The migration to VHS as a primary vehicle of viewership also impacts the film's aesthetics: with each dub, the generational loss increases, resulting in increasingly more visual noise. The accumulated deterioration acts as a watermark, tracking the circulation of the film through the hands of enthusiastic bootleggers. Moving further and further away from its original look, an acquired underground history is charted through resolution loss.

Another history is alluded to in this deterioration—the story of Karen's premature death, and long struggle with anorexia. I am far from the first fan to make this connection, and I do so cautiously, recognizing how Karen's tragic death often eclipses her life, it seems that with each successive generation there are those, like myself, who appoint her the patron saint of sad-girl status. Haynes early choice of screening venues (pre-litigation) implies that he considered *Superstar* in the canon of experimental film, however this isn't wholly apparent from the film itself. Novelty of the dolls aside, its reliance on genre marking and narration make it abundantly readable, verging on allegorical overkill. Yet a subtextual nuance emerges through the decay, the material dualism of the film's history mirroring the depletion of Karen's own body.¹⁴ The correlation between the physicality of media and the body is discussed by Herbert who cites the nexus of fetish in the VHS object as a "phenomenological return to the body."¹⁵ I cannot imagine a more entangled illustration of this relationship than the twinned histories of Karen Carpenter and Todd Haynes' *Superstar*.

I am disproportionately drawn to the haunting ambience of the decay, which marks the ghostly presence of the dubs by leaving traces of the labour and relationships that facilitated circulation of the bootleg film. I am nostalgic for this era of circulation as evidence of a golden age of subculture, where the necessity of a physical transaction guarded the sanctity of a scarcity which encoded authenticity. This nostalgia is of course loaded with the romanticizing lens of hindsight, which tends to obscure the full context, focusing instead on dialectics—in this case the tension between analogue materiality and digital immateriality.

Coincidentally, nostalgia was a key ingredient of the Carpenters' own musical brand. Their image and their music were a kind of anti-zeitgeist which pined for an imaginary capsule of white suburban-ness. As described by scholar Karen Tongson, the Carpenters were "inspired in part by a dream of 'yesterdays once more'—the radio traces of a good life that has since receded into memory, or perhaps never was."¹⁶ Yet in the intervening decades the Carpenters' legacy has taken a surprising turn (no doubt, in part due to Haynes contribution), landing in the cult canon. I would argue that this resuscitation resists what some might claim is an ironic subversion of intent, rather evoking a sincere admiration of what the Carpenters have since come to represent: the impossibility of normalcy, a liberation which has continued to resonate with succeeding generations. The bootlegs of *Superstar* disclose this fabrication by making visible the stratigraphy of mediation between index and image and approximating this dissonance in visual terms.

If nostalgia is a compelling drive towards this tactile return, I have to wonder what value it

¹² Daniel Herbert, "Nostalgia Merchants: VHS Distribution in the Era of Digital Delivery," *Journal of Film and Video* 69, no. 2 (summer 2017): 9.

¹³ Hildebrand, "Grainy Days and Mondays," 80.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁵ Herbert, "Nostalgia Merchants," 15.

¹⁶ Karen Tongson, *Why Karen Carpenter Matters* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 13.

holds beyond that? Straw, addressing this question, suggests that the circulation of these objects is a form of archival work, “extending the cultural space they occupy.”¹⁷ This is certainly the case for the Carpenters, whose recontextualization unfolded decades past their prime. I can’t imagine that the Carpenters nor Todd Haynes could have pre-empted the circuitous trajectories their work would eventually take. The nostalgic urge to revisit and revive these works is a powerful conduit of cultural preservation, especially of the margins which evade more formal interventions. It is with this in mind that I want to discuss Daniel Barrow’s project *Winnipeg Babysitter: an incomplete, local history of 1980s public broadcasting*.

Winnipeg Babysitter (2009)

In this work, Barrow inserts himself into this history as a fan, a curator, an annotator, and an archivist, preserving a piece of regional history through the ephemeral media that accompanied it.¹⁸ *Winnipeg Babysitter* exists as a hybrid performance project in which Barrow, in pop-up video style, provides text commentary via an overhead projector, alongside his compiled footage.¹⁹ It has also been preserved as a compilation DVD, albeit without Barrow’s footnotes.

Beginning in the late 1960s, the Canadian Broadcasting Act included a mandate that cable networks provide airtime to the community, reflecting a long-lost ideology of “electronic

democracy.”²⁰ By the 1980s, public access television was a thriving form of vernacular culture. This golden age of public access came to a resounding end when Winnipeg’s local cable company Videon was sold to Shaw, typifying the greater trend towards media conglomeration.²¹ At the time of Shaw’s annexation of the local networks, Barrow was working as the distribution manager at Video Pool Media Arts Centre, overseeing an archive of experimental video works. His interest was piqued by the rumour about the destruction of the tapes, and he considered how he might intervene in this loss of history.²² It wasn’t until a few years later, when Barrow revisited the idea, that the project was fully conceptualized and he began to track down the footage from these formative years of his life. The result is a messy and diversified compilation of footage, but Barrow’s affection for the material remains apparent in his handling of it. A project that could so easily become disingenuous—if not mean-spirited—is saved by this evident endearment. As individual clips the footage indulges in nostalgia, through the opportunity to revisit ephemeral fragments of television which, for many including Barrow, were formative viewing experiences. As a whole it accomplishes even more: an (incomplete) regional history of a broadcast ideology that falls outside of market logic; the potential for participation and expression at the local level; and memorialization of such a space in the wake of conglomeration.

¹⁷ Straw, *Embedded Memories*, 10.

¹⁸ The idea of ephemeral media which I am using is influenced by the book *Cinephemera: Archives, Ephemeral Cinema, and New Screen Histories in Canada*, edited by Zoë Druick, and Gerda Cammaer.

¹⁹ “My Winnipeg, Daniel Barrow, *Winnipeg Babysitter*,” Plug In ICA, accessed February 18, 2020, <https://plugin.org/exhibitions/my-winnipeg-daniel-barrow-winnipeg-babysitter/>.

²⁰ “TV Party: A Panorama of Public Access Television in New York,” *Museum of the Moving Image*, accessed March 21, <http://www.movingimage.us/programs/2011/02/11/detail/tv-party-a-panorama-of-public-access-television-in-new-york-city/>.

²¹ Laura Kenins, “Winnipeg Babysitter,” *The Coast*, February 14, 2008, <https://www.thecoast.ca/halifax/winnipeg-babysitter/Content?oid=962347>.

²² Daniel Barrow, “Babysitting Winnipeg: Daniel Barrow Looks Back At The Golden Age Of Public Access,” interview with Ellen Freeman, *Fringe Arts*, accessed February 15, 2020, <https://fringearts.com/2010/08/17/babysitting-winnipeg-daniel-barrow-looks-back-at-the-golden-age-of-public-access/>.

Because the tapes had been destroyed, Barrow decided to reach out to the creators that he could remember in hopes they would still have documentation of the programming. If the original producers no longer had copies of the work, the artist had to rely on “television collectors, fans, and enthusiasts” to supplement his search.²³ A notable segment in the compilation is “The Cosmopolitans,” a musical duo comprised of Louise Wynberg and Marion Clemens, who took requests by fans which they would play on air. At 22 years on air, the show holds the distinction as the longest running Winnipeg cable show. Louise played organ and piano while Marion played the drums, and both women were senior citizens with “encyclopedic knowledge of music,” as Barrow describes:

The Cosmopolitans are Winnipeg icons because everyone grew up watching them. They were ubiquitous on that station. They had an enormous fan base amongst senior citizens but also had a cult following of people who thought they were camp or funny. They wore matching gingham outfits and blond pageboy wigs, and every so often they would invite the students of their music school (children) to join the band.²⁴

In the same interview (conducted by fellow filmmaker Mike Hoolbloom) Barrow recounts his experience of reaching out to Marion (sadly Louise had passed away). The two have since become friends, and a significant outcome of *Winnipeg Babysitter*'s recirculation of this footage is that Marion and Louise, for the first time, were publicly recognized as partners.²⁵

Several of the artists included in the compilation have gone on to have acclaimed art careers. One excerpt, in which the cheeseball theme music for the television show *Blossom* is

swapped for a with a harder, noise-heavy alternative, is made by Marcel Dzama and Neil Farber of Royal Art Lodge fame. Another spoof of doomsday ‘preppers’ and talk show tactics features Guy Maddin. The eclectic collection of artists that Barrow assembles into a singular dialogue mimics the unpredictable rhythms of public access channels. The undifferentiated approach to artists like Dzama and Farber alongside community groups devoted to Persian cat appreciation (*What's New Pussycat? Silver Persian Extravaganza!*) proves a tender and promising thesis to the project. The desire for expression is treated like any artistic drive, a solemn reminder that the art world can claim no monopoly on weirdness or creativity.

Perhaps the most infamous inclusion is the *The Pollock and Pollock Gossip Hour* hosted by siblings Rockin' Ronnie and Nifty Nathalie, a program well known to Winnipeggers for its outrageous antics and general eccentricity. The show featured interviews and guests, but perhaps the most poignant memories are the dance sequences in which the siblings would toss on an album and Nathalie would dance provocatively. Recently, as I reviewed the Pollock's footage included in *Winnipeg Babysitter*, it occurred to me how much the Pollocks were emulating the loose, youthful structure of the early MuchMusic programming (of which the Ehm tape was culled from). Barrow too cites the structure of his intervention as mimicking a style of pop-up videos so endemic to music television.²⁶ The direction of this influence does not appear to be unilateral however, as MuchMusic hit the air in 1984, directly in the prime of public access' reign and, perhaps absorbed a trace of its essence. In a rigorous study of MuchMusic's “televsual flow,” scholar Kip Pegley observes that the channel's structure, while undisputedly commercial, was inflected with the public broadcasting ideology (a pervasive model in Canada perpetuated largely vis-à-vis the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation),

²³ Barrow, “After Charlie Brown and Liberace,” interview with Mike Hoolbloom, 170.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

which attempted to serve a wide demographic of Canadian viewers of varying styles and tastes.²⁷

Comparing the nature of MuchMusic to its hyper-commercial American counterpart MTV, Pegley maintains that the former offers a messier and more diverse range of programming. Through a broader distribution of creative authority Pegley argues that a national culture of public access television resulted in the cultural appetite for incongruity that made the channel distinct and influential. Beyond its role as an accessible platform, the idiosyncratic televisuality of these spaces appears to have impacted the cadence of alternative broadcasting, and other forms of programming that privilege unlikely pairings. In an article about radio broadcast, scholar Jody Berland identifies parallel tensions arising between the organizational logic of consumer culture and the messier ambience of alternative and public broadcasting spaces. As Berland claims, “the history of communications technology is not only that of the discourses of power, but also of opposition and difference, and of the interaction of these.”²⁸ Although she filters her analysis through the space of radio, much of her argument is applicable to the history of local television. Where the narratives diverge is the erasure of the latter, a loss which *Winnipeg Babysitter* seeks to mourn and lament. Under similar circumstances Mark Fisher, too, observes the latent failures of this loss. Recalling a long-forgotten television program that aired on the BBC titled *Sapphire and Steel*, Fisher remarks that:

The conditions for this kind of visionary public broadcasting would disappear during the 1980s, as the British media became taken

over by what another television auteur, Dennis Potter, would call the ‘occupying powers’ of neoliberalism²⁹

Fisher’s comments pre-empt my instinct to suggest that social media has filled the void left by these spaces. YouTube especially seems designed to occupy the need for self-expression. The indiscriminate and accessible model further suggests that this platform appeals to the same desire that catalyzed the creators of *Winnipeg Babysitter*. What Fisher pinpoints is the role of neoliberalism in this history, and the confidence it places in late capitalism’s global totality at the expense of civic experiments like public access. YouTube emerges from the legacy of these experiments, and appears to offer “an equalizing, socially subversive phenomenon—a way for the online masses to choose their stars directly, circumventing the traditional gatekeepers and tastemakers.”³⁰ In reality, YouTube is a faithful product of capitalist logic (specifically its malignant viral offspring platform capitalism) which commodifies and exploits the desires and expressions that are so tenderly treated in *Winnipeg Babysitter*.

Barrow’s methods of sourcing footage for this project rely on the city’s sentimentality and the amateur archival practices that occur at the community level. The traces of this methodology appear in the quality of the tapes which contain their share of noise, tracking loss, and the occasional glitch. Like *Superstar*, this degradation is implicit to the history of the videos, which have sat in basements and garages and likely endured multiple tapings. The methods by which these programs have been archived reflects the

²⁷ Kip Pegley, “Coming to You Wherever You Are: Exploring the Imagined Communities of Much Music (Canada) and MTV (USA),” in *Medium Cool*, ed. Roger Beebe (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 209.

²⁸ Jody Berland, “Contradicting Media: Towards a Political Phenomenology of Listening,” in *The Sound Studies Reader*. ed. Jonathan Sterne (London: Routledge, 2012), 43.

²⁹ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (United Kingdom: Zero Books, 2014), 19.

³⁰ Marta Figlerowicz, “The Gatekeepers aren’t Gone,” *Jacobin*, July 8, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/07/viral-youtube-twitter-internet-media/>.

circumstances under which they were made—they were kept because they meant enough to someone to do so. Straw refers to the videocassette as “a technology through which cultural knowledges are stored and transported,” and in the case of this project, the tapes detail a history of production and preservation which was not determined by financial incentives or institutional criteria.

For his role, Barrow is part curator, part archivist, and part performer, a fruitful collision of personal and professional practices that make for a serendipitous detail in this salvaged history, whose persistence is dependent on the continued investment by those who cherish the work. Barrow’s contribution to the preservation of footage is not dissimilar to the bootleggers of *Superstar*, whose incremental archival acts of dubbing and distributing kept the work circulating.

In an informal survey surrounding the bootleg economy of *Superstar*, author Lucas Hildebrand summarizes his findings as stories of “sentimental personal association or quest narratives,” indicating that the economy in which the dubs circulated was dictated by devotion and connection.³¹ Those who possess these tapes see their lineage as coauthors of this aura; perhaps the most memorable response was from filmmaker Jim Hubbard, whose VHS was inherited from a friend who passed away: “to me it’s more important as an object that belonged to my friend Dave than as Todd’s film (which is rather poorly represented by this copy).”³² Straw’s sentiment about the transportation of cultural knowledges can perhaps then be extended to the social life of the film, which in this case is inscribed through diminished resolution.

Conclusion

Both of these moving image works orbit around the afterlife of the footage itself, the potency embedded in their circuitous routes to the present and the creative capacity of fandom to intervene in the predictive shelf life of cultural products. I’m far from the first person to challenge

the authority of archive, but even after so much cultural probing there persists the idea of an institution which privileges provenance and pristine conditions. These examples offer a sense of something entirely different, a subterranean system which relies on momentum rather than inertia to preserve its content. What I have attempted to extract through the analysis of these two works is an inflection of meaning that accumulates in circulation, especially through these underground migratory routes. The gesture of preservation, which has allowed these works to continue, is a creative and collaborative practice that presents this footage in new configurations and dialogues. To worship at the altar of obsolescence is perhaps a cliché of tiresome nostalgia, but I would like to leave open the possibility that through it we might be able to recognize the rich, magnetically encoded histories that are lurking in menacing laundry rooms and basements all over the place.

³¹ Hildebrand, “Grainy Days and Mondays,” 83.

³² *Ibid.*, 83.

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