Time on TV

Temporal Displacement and Mashup Television

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Introduction

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> *What I do have control over is my own intention. In the space between free will and determinism are these imperceptible gaps, these lacunae, the volitional interstices, the holes and the nodes, the material and the aether, the something and nothing that, at once, separate and bind the moments together, the story together, my actions together, and it's in these gaps, in these pauses where the fictional science breaks down, where neither the science nor the fiction can penetrate, where the fiction that we call the present moment exists.*[1]
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> —Yu, How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe, 217–18

Perhaps, then, I should start with a conclusion. At the end of his novel *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, Charles Yu concludes that we live our lives in perpetual yet imperceptible gaps: between past and future, between memory and anticipation, between "is" and "was." Our present is always *now*, a fleeting moment that changes as soon as it is experienced. Yu's protagonist, also named Charles Yu, spends ten years in one of these "gaps," these "pauses in time," as he tries to come to terms with the impossible paradox of time travel.

But why open a book about temporality on television with a quote from the conclusion of a science fiction novel? Yu's work speaks a truth about our current relationship with time, memory, and

mediation. Today, we all live in a "science fictional" universe, where digital technology has revealed and built vast networks of people, new types of textuality, and whole swaths of distinctive fictions.

This book is a work of television criticism, but it takes into account the important relationship between television content, digital culture, and a quotidian sociability in online media. Today, this relationship comes to a head on our television screens. There has recently been a surge of television programs that feature "temporal displacement"—changes in narrative depictions of time. While forms of temporal displacement have been on television since the start of the medium, there has never been a time with as much temporal displacement on as many shows as there is now. An emergent temporal complexity in online media has engendered this shift in television textuality. Contemporary temporal displacement both amplifies and mirrors the audience's reconstruction of the cultural temporal discontinuity that also emerges on our computer screens. Television thus displaces and distorts the construct of *time,* emulating online media characteristics and serving as a heuristic by which viewers learn to control their own discontinuous lives. By analyzing these *aesthetic* changes, we can uncover the larger *cultural* changes online media create.

Television inherently relies on the concept of time. Specifically, I want to focus on a heterochronic experience of time within television content.[2] As William Uricchio describes, television is heterochronic—displaying multiple time frames—in a number of ways. The first Uricchio calls a "sequence" of television programming; the second an "interpenetration" of "particular programmes over time"; the third the "repetition" of footage or programs. As Sarah Kozloff has shown, time on television is multi-faceted; and ultimately, I agree with Jennifer Gillan, who argues at the opening of *Television and New Media* that television is all "about time."[3] But whereas all three scholars here talk about "time" in the sense of "programming, scheduling, advertising, promotion, and distribution strategies in relation to the evolution of media technologies and viewer practices," I think TV's relationship with time reflects in the textuality of the programming

itself. The representation of time within individual television texts relates to larger concerns in the media environment.[4]

Temporal displacement occurs when television programs play with time, using flashforwards, flashbacks, time travel, and/or changes in the protagonist's memory, to heighten the spectacle of the television narrative. Of course, as pop culture writer Steven Johnson has pointed out, narratives always and inevitably "revolve around a mix of the present and future, between what's happening now and the tantalizing question of where it's all headed."[5] I'm looking at long-form serialized narrative, where "the story and discourse do not come to a conclusion during an episode, and the threads are picked up again after an hiatus."[6] Narratives that engage with temporal displacement invoke two or more different time frames, each happening at the same "instant" on screen. They also might engage with characters who have multiple or vast flashbacks (or flashforwards), transporting the plot from the "present" moment to a past or future moment (what Bordwell tellingly describes as "self-conscious narrational asides to the spectator").[7] Through the deployment of time as a tangible element of a narrative, television producers both emulate and project audience engagement with the television text. I will show that temporal displacement gets the audience more involved in the narrative, allowing them to piece together aspects of the plot. As media content becomes spread out across technologies, as narrative content stretches across episodes, and as representations of characters' memories fracture a program's plot, viewers become assemblers.

Temporal displacement can play with time because it offers viewers greater control of their own linearity. Temporal displacement situates moments of time—past, present, future—within a stable set of bounds. Media themselves lock and are locked: the past is what was on television before; the present is what is on now; the future is "next on." Through the stability of the temporal location of the television *show* on TV each week, the play of temporality within a show itself can become liberating.[8] It can give the audience the semblance of control over time: it seems to say, *if you can understand* Lost's (2004)

bizarre time jumping, then you can control your understanding of any temporal discrepancy. And in a very real sense, that control represents audience power.

The television show *Flashforward* (2009) illustrates the idea of temporal displacement I discuss in this book. In the show everyone on Earth blacks out simultaneously for 137 seconds. During this period of stupor, the population of the planet "flashes forward" and experiences 137 seconds of their life six months in the future. Upon awakening, each person remembers his/her future, or at least their experience of that future, and then tries to understand it. Some characters are pregnant, some are being held captive, some are drunk, and others are engaged in illegal or illicit activities. The few that didn't "flashforward" believe that their lack of vision signals their imminent death. Yet, as the six-month window closes, characters' realities change noticeably from what their vision indicated. For example, FBI agent Marshall Vogal dies before his flashforward comes "true," illustrating the unpredictability of the future. The development of the narrative towards (the inevitable) moment represented in the characters' flashforwards creates an infinite number of possible narratives, as each character's flashforward becomes a point of reference for a number of "possible worlds"—each narrative thread both existing (in flashforward form) and *not* existing (because it could be changed) at the same time.[9]

The show illustrates temporal displacement by focusing *both* on the narratives of the future and the narratives of the present. Both narratives take place at the same "time" on screen. In each episode, a character's flashforward might be expanded, allowing the audience to see more of the future. The "story" of *Flashforward* takes place between the characters' possible futures and his/her current investigation of that future. Take, for example, the character Olivia Benford, who experiences a flashforward and sees herself talking intimately to an unfamiliar man. When she later glimpses that man in a hospital hallway, she both knows and does not know him—she knows that they will one day know each other, but she does not yet know him. The audience must keep character traits, time frames, and

dual narratives in mind simultaneously in order to piece together the show's overarching narrative.

Similarly, Olivia's husband Mark Benford illustrates a second dimension of temporal displacement I discuss in this book: a shift in the characterization of memory. Mark's flashforward takes him to a future in which he is drunk and hallucinatory. Unable to piece together his experiences, Mark's vision of himself drinking undermines his resolution to remain sober. Because his *memory* of a possible future is also affected by that future drunkenness, the images in his flashforward become unreliable and untrustworthy. Much as with Olivia's vision, the audience of *Flashforward* has to sort through aspects of a future that might or might not be "true" (i.e., that actually happen in that future) or can contain aspects that are "false" (i.e., that are manifestations of a drunken vision). Mark must question his own past memory of this future event. Clarifying the reliability of a character's subjective vision necessarily involves intense attention to detail and a powerful understanding of narrative complexity—skills, I argue, that are enabled by today's digital culture.

This concept of "digital culture" manifests through the rapid expansion of online technology. Digital culture inherently relies on electronic communication as a primary means of translating information from one location to another, uses electronic communication to connect with other people from around the world, and creates unique cultural artifacts using digital technology.[10] People from around the world use digital technology to text, to Facebook message, to Tweet, to share on Tumblr, to "check-in"—and often all from the same device, the cell phone. But in all these activities, with all these different technologies, the basic communicative intent—to share with others—doesn't change. In other words, digital culture uses electronic technology to augment, but not to replace, older means of communication.

Yet, we've moved into a new era of connectivity. The default position of our media is "always connected," and we are constantly in contact. Children are growing up in a digital culture using wireless devices, ubiquitous Wi-Fi, and streaming video, and are redefining