

## Press Pause

I am twenty years old; therefore, I cannot begin this essay with the phrase “back in my day...” without losing some, if not all, credibility. I am not old enough to possess the right to proclaim that things were better or simpler (or both) when I was young because I was young not long ago. I am still, relatively, young. But things have changed. In twenty years, numerous things have been altered, revamped, replaced, lost. The lost is what concerns me.

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Sitting in the Mac lab of the Robert Henderson Language Media Center, located on the ground floor of the Cathedral of Learning, the most overrated building on Pitt’s campus, I feel misplaced. I’ve never used a Mac before. My professor tells us that the instructions and materials for today’s lab are listed on CourseWeb. With the help of a fellow classmate, I upload the sound files into Praat, click “View and Edit,” and then they appear. Spectrograms.

I hear someone say, “This is stupid. It’s just a bunch of gray, fuzzy crap.” But there’s something beautiful about them. “We’re measuring formants,” my professor continues. “Formants are bands of higher energy. They form when clusters of harmonics occur close to the resonance frequency.” Why am I still staring at the screen? There’s some sort of connection happening here, but what? These bars and lines look alive, buzzing with energy, yet they are at a standstill, moments of phonation captured and expressed in shades of gray.

I’m not thinking about spectrograms anymore. Sara Crewe is standing amongst a group of girls, telling a story from the *Ramayana*, the volume of her voice increasing as the climax draws nearer. And then Ravana is on the screen, his royal blue skin against a sunny background. And then the moment is paused: Ravana’s blue is blurring into the yellow, and thick, strong bands of gray vibrations divide his frightening figure into segments, into vowels. I am a child

again, sitting in front of the television, in front of the VCR, one finger on the “pause” button, another on “play,” and I’m switching back and forth, neck craned upward, in awe of the analog life on the screen.

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The Wikipedia page for VHS begins: “The **Video Home System** (better known by its abbreviation **VHS**) is a consumer-level analog recording videocassette standard developed by Victor Company of Japan (JVC).” Another website adds: “Originally *VHS* was an acronym for *Vertical Helical Scan* (a reference to the recording system used) but was later changed to the more consumer-friendly *Video Home System*.” A smart move, I think. Put “home” in the name of anything, and people will gravitate toward it.

Well, that isn’t really the case anymore. Other words have become more favorable in the minds of consumers. Digital. Remastered. High Definition. According to the etymology section of the DVD Wikipedia page, “the official DVD charter documents specify that the basis of the DVD name stems from the term ‘digital versatile disc.’” That’s another one: versatile. Why buy something that lacks versatility? You can watch a DVD with a DVD player, a PlayStation, an Xbox, a computer. A VHS only plays in a VCR.

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On December 22, 2008, the *Los Angeles Times* published an article entitled “VHS era is winding down.” The article announces: “On a crisp Friday morning in October, the final truckload of VHS tapes rolled out of a Palm Harbor, Fla., warehouse run by Ryan J. Kugler, the last major supplier of the tapes.” Shipped to some “bargain-basement” chain like Family Dollar or Dollar Tree or Dollar General, or some mom-and-pop pop culture shop. Kugler is quoted as making statements such as “It’s dead” and “Anything left in warehouse we’ll just give away or

throw away.”

Thrown away? Dumped in a humid Florida landfill? This happened three years ago, but I find myself angered by it now. What about the *loss*? Am I alone in my fear that something valuable is now missing? I google “VHS only” and find two lists that confirm my fear. The first, on Amazon: “The Intellectual’s Top 26 Films Only Available on VHS.” A few titles stand out to me: *Beauty and the Devil*, *Weapons of the Spirit*, *Peter Brook’s King Lear*, *Of Human Bondage*, *The Last Supper*. I haven’t seen any of them. The titles alone *sound* important, valuable, entertaining, profound. And what is the intellectual to do if he or she does not own a VCR? Then, I suppose, the intellect will suffer.

The second list, on eBay: “Movies Released on VHS Only.” Not necessarily for the intellectual. I stop at #68: *Rasputin* (1996). Obviously, this is a mistake. I watched this movie in my tenth-grade world history class. I specifically remember my teacher saying that it won all sorts of awards. IMDB lists 8 awards: 3 Emmys, 3 Golden Globes, 1 Golden Satellite Award, 1 Screen Actors Guild Award. Amazon only lists VHS copies of the film.

Why hasn’t this film been re-released on DVD? What is the criterion for determining whether or not a film should be converted to DVD format? I google a variety of phrases, such as “criterion for DVD conversion” and “films converted to DVD.” No answers. One day, televisions will not be able to show VHS tapes. The technology will be too advanced. There won’t be adequate hook-ups for the VCR.

One day, these tapes, these films, will be dead.

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There used to be a video store in my hometown called “Vic’s Flicks.” For about three years straight, nearly every time my mom took me and my siblings to this store, I would choose

the film *A Little Princess*. I was a delusional child, easily confused by all the fairy tales I read. For a period of time, I genuinely believed that I could someday become a princess. Or, that I was one already. This film confirmed my belief. The main character, Sara Crewe, believes that “every girl’s a princess.”

I could rarely sit through the entire movie without being distracted by something. But that’s what the pause button was for. If I needed to run out of the room to grab my favorite stuffed animal so she could watch the movie with me, I could just press pause, and that moment would stand still until I came back. Except, it wasn’t exactly still. Once paused, the screen became blurry, the image ever so slightly buzzing and vibrating, anxiously awaiting my return. Colors would mix, one flowing into the next. Faces became distorted.

But, for me, the pause button was not simply practical. It was entertaining. My mom would often catch me pressing pause, then staring at the screen for several moments, then pressing play, then pause again, and so on. If you had asked me back then why I liked pressing pause, I may have told you, “Because it looks different.” Not the most sophisticated answer, but still true. I was fascinated by the change from fluid, grainy images to fuzzy, grainier images. And then there were the bands. The formants. Lines of grayish movement, darting back and forth, static beams that divided the screen.

Unless I pressed stop, the film was still alive. Even when paused, it had energy. Analog energy. The Free On-line Dictionary of Computing defines analog as “a description of a continuously variable signal or a circuit or device designed to handle such signals. The opposite is ‘discrete’ or ‘digital.’” And that’s what a VHS tape was. Continuous. Variable. Others say, unreliable. Each time you played a tape, you made the picture a little bit “worse” through wear and tear. An article from the April 2010 issue of the magazine *Sound and Image* describes how a

VHS tape is played: “When you insert a VHS cassette, the player draws it in, opens up the tape protection flap on the edge (pressing a button on the side to unlock it). Then it pulls out a length of tape (having first pressed a button on the bottom to unlock the spindles) and wraps it about three quarters of the way around the large round tape head, which then spins furiously to increase the relative speed between tape and head.” That furiousness seemed most apparent when I pressed pause, the screen revealing the struggle happening within the VCR, the struggle between the two composite images that make up each frame, the struggle of life and living.

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The UK version of the website Wired posted an article on August 16, 2011, entitled “Paused VHS Tapes Inspire Paintings.” My first thought when discovering this article: You’ve got to be shitting me. The article begins: “Swiss artist Andy Denzler creates paintings that are designed to look like the fuzzy image of a paused VHS recording.” This isn’t real. Denzler’s description of his work: “It’s as if I’ve pressed the fast-forward on a video machine, then hit the pause button, so reality comes to a standstill. I speed up and slow down the colors. What remains is a distorted moment — classically painted, oil on canvas — which, upon closer inspection is very abstract, but from distance looks real.”

I go to his website, and it’s all there. The distortion. The fuzziness. The formants. The painting “Bedroom Portrait Face Down” stands out. A girl with short, brown hair looks downward, on a bed that looks like a sea of brown. In the background is a tall brown beam, perhaps a bookshelf. And next to that, a lighter brown box, which appears to be a desk. Her dress is blue on top, but brown on the bottom, flowing seamlessly into the brown sheets. A pair of white pillows in the background. Gray lines streak across the scene, adding to the confusion. Her face is distorted, and I can’t make out her emotions. But she is looking down, looking directly at

the buzzing band below her, this formant full of violent energy. It is the only formant in the painting, and she is fixated on it. And so am I.

“Formants are bands of higher energy that form when clusters of harmonics occur close to the resonance frequency.” Harmonics are multiples of the fundamental frequency, the lowest frequency of a periodic waveform. That doesn’t mean much to me. But resonance, the tendency of a system to oscillate at a greater amplitude at some frequencies than others, that system’s preference for one resonance over another, that is what fascinates me. There is a particular vibration to which a mechanical or electrical system is drawn. Just like the girl in the painting, we require a particular frequency in order to resonate.

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*Beauty and the Beast* is on ABC Family, and my roommate insists that we watch it together. I haven’t seen the film since I was eight years old. Only two minutes into the film, and something is wrong. Terribly wrong. It doesn’t feel the way it used to. Because it doesn’t look the way it used to.

Belle is brilliant, with sharp outlines and distinct features. She is a paint-by-numbers exercise in a children’s activity book. No longer a sensitive, complex character who loves others based on what’s on the inside instead of the outside. She is too harsh-looking now for me to believe anything she says or does.

The scene where Belle enters the west wing of the Beast’s castle used to frighten me. Sometimes, to the point of tears. I remember it was so dark, all I could make out were the tattered, ripped fabrics here and there. When the Beast emerged, I never saw it coming.

But tonight, the west wing isn’t dark. It’s blue. And it isn’t scary anymore. I can see the outline of the beast before his face emerges on the screen. I could never see that outline before.

Disgusted, I go to Disney's website for an explanation. The version I saw on television is the "Diamond" edition, "digitally restored beyond its original brilliance."

*Beauty and the Beast* is not a tale of brilliance. It's about the importance of the internal, the importance of genuine emotion, finding and expressing that emotion in order to become human again. The idea of this film being "restored" or "remastered" in order to capture something "original" is preposterous. Anything that once belonged to the original has been lost in this process.

There is something to be valued in the muted color palate of the original. The VHS. The analog. You could pause a moment where the Beast is roaring, and he would not completely cease to roar. He is there with you, waiting for what comes next. He is unsure, his face is blurry, it's unclear if he's angry, heartbroken, or confused. And he might be all three. Because emotion is more complicated than a perfect, digital moment.

What does this preference for clarity say about us? We have become so caught up in conveying the "real" that we've lost sight of what that means. "High definition" is *not* actuality. "Remastered" is *not* improvement. It is a loss, an over-amplification of reality, a detraction from what was intended. We have mustered up all of our determination in order to eliminate the flaws and the fuzziness, all for the sake of lucidity. But for what benefit?

We are afraid of insinuation, of being misguided by the suggested, of what is possible but not apparent. We try to capture every image and idea through definition, and anything that lacks transparency, we discard. But this method is flawed. We do not live in a black-and-white world. Our perception isn't digital, despite the picture on the screen. Our world is unclear, often muted, fuzzy, vibrating and ever-changing. We can try to stop dead in our tracks, to convey a standstill, but we can only pause. In reality, we are always resonating.