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## Televisual Memory and the Telescoping Fire Station:

### Landscape as Media-Memory Site

There are wormholes in Southern California; space-time tunnels that link varied points, fusing time with landscape, reality with the vividly scripted. Los Angeles County Fire Station 127 is one such distortion—the perfect metaphor for the conflation of time, place, memory and contingency I refer to herein as the ‘telescoping elastic-space’<sup>1</sup> of mediated landscape. Media impact individual, cultural and historical negotiations, affecting our understanding (and even recollection) of locative forces. Televisual information also informs memory and our associations with real places and events, with little distinction between fiction and fact. Landscapes become dynamic memory-sites—active platforms that condense (and overlay) our perception of time, history and place. This interrelationship becomes multiform when landscapes are recognized or remembered in (and through) television—referencing the way media<sup>2</sup> informs our understanding of space-place, generating connections to distant or imaginary locations and interactions. When we think of a specific, culturally mediated site—including settings only encountered via representation—we engage a spiral of physicality and temporal locality. The site is shaped by the mutable process of remembering and forgetting, by literal and virtual encounters, often without index. This elasticity is ripe for artistic investigation and I probe the condensation of place, time

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<sup>1</sup> It is “elastic” because it is capable of expanding, contracting, mutating and adjusting for each observer and at different times, in different contexts. The telescoping reality of a location includes its physicality, temporality (simultaneous past, present and future as experienced by individuals and groups), its stories and associations...

<sup>2</sup> Cinema also frames our understanding of location, identity—even ideology, but for this paper, I focus on televisual impact and television theory, especially given the vital differences between televisual and cinematic language (Farr 23).

and media-memory in my interdisciplinary installation: *The Cascade: Moments in the Televisual Desert*. My engagement with the conceptual space-place of Los Angeles County and its entanglement with the real, the scripted, the culturally iconic and the personally mythologized considers landscape a functional site of cultural and geologic exchange. The work attempts to open dialogue between the real, the fantastical and the geologic, conflating place with time and allowing landscape to index a kind of relative oscillation: a memory-textured platform of exchange.

Station 127 (Figs. 1 & 2) occupies a literal, physical location (at 2049 East 223<sup>rd</sup> Street in Carson, California), simultaneously operating within the scope of fiction, imagination, history and recollection—an active, transient state; a telescope of temporal engagements. In continuous operation since 1967, it has also ‘performed’ as the fictional Station 51 on *Emergency!* (1972-1977),<sup>3</sup>—and whose interior was replicated on a Universal sound stage, with half of the filming occurring on-site, the other half on a precision simulacrum (Yokley 102). Through international syndication, the building became familiar to millions—its likeness spanning 129 television episodes, 6 TV movies, syndicated replay, photographs, individual memories (experiential and scripted), the lives of stationed firefighters, actors and producers who worked in its parallel metaverse, the journeys of media pilgrims<sup>4</sup>, local populations, Google Street Views,<sup>5</sup> websites,

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<sup>3</sup> An hour-long, American medical drama produced by R.A. Cinader (Adam-12) and Jack Webb (Dragnet), which had measurable impact on the growth of paramedic and emergency response programs (Yokley V-VI, 16-17). In recognition of the show’s effect on the American medical industry, the Smithsonian inducted equipment (including the BioPhone and helmets) into the National Museum of American History, a fascinating cross-over between the scripted, the iconically hyper-real and the nationalist narrative of the museum-archive (Yokley VI).

<sup>4</sup> Television theorist Milly Buonanno suggests “media pilgrims travel to sites where TV was filmed. The visit can take on a ritual occasion. The rare opportunity to be physically present in the real place where TV was filmed” (79-80). Bridging this gap recognizes the poignancy of real-unreal connections, and liminal spaces between extremes. Visiting the real makes the fictional experience all the more real, even if the pilgrim knows the site is fictionalized.

home videos, even fan culture inclusions (fanfiction, fanart). The native desert-urban space of the television program and the humble firehouse present a mythologized America, an elastic platform affecting public understanding (and cultural memory) of the American medical system and of Los Angeles, reframing the region for those who live it, and defining it for those who virtually experience it.<sup>6</sup>

Scholar-artist Renee Green suggests “many people’s earliest recollections now include films and TV or films on TV or played by VCRs. Memories include social and private recollections—how old I was, who I was with, where I was. Films themselves now serve an indexing function to assist in gaining access to memory,” (Green 53).<sup>7</sup> Returning to our telescoping fire station, LaCo Firefighter/Paramedic Jeff Brum describes his youthful fascination with *Emergency!*, claiming it directly influenced his decision to become a paramedic; the fiction of media-place influenced his career. Later, Brum was actually stationed at 127 and found the confluence of personal, televisual mythology and lived experience uncanny. The physical reality “still looked like it did in the TV show,” yet Brum was now living the hyper-real by literally

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<sup>5</sup> Shows like *Emergency!* function as an early form of Google Street View; a proto-virtual-database of streets and locations, caught on tape as establishing shots (McCoy). The actual television footage becomes a semi-documentary process of space-time that reminds us the programs are shot in real, yet mutated, space.

<sup>6</sup> Fan sub-culture, like the memory-seekers at the Official Dwight Schultz Fansite travel to locations captured in *The A-Team* (1983) which also spans greater Los Angeles County. Fans journey (literally, or via Google Street View) to match television mythology to real sites, discovering which places still exist and which have undergone dramatic change (“Filming Locations”). They build a collaborative archive of material online. For many, their only understanding, or at least their earliest understanding, of California comes from virtual representation. For those who lived there, before or after the original filming, the televisual information adds new depth to the personal experience.

<sup>7</sup> ...concepts she actively investigates in her own work. Many of Green’s pieces, like *Partially Buried in Three Parts*, start with a “genealogical trace” tied to the artist as individual, but which negotiate broader considerations of media as history, monument, and time (Merewether 50). For Green, media allows the viewer to regain a sense of access to past events, while considering the way media itself affects personal, social and cultural social memory (Merewether 53).

embodying a once-mythical media role in life, in the literal, physical location where the show was filmed (Brum qtd. in Yokely 103-104). Television narratives themselves have become part of our working memory-experience, blended with the actual to become a ‘hyper-actuality,’ tied to moments, perceived experiences and places. TV distorts our sense of the “situational geography” of social life, allowing us to be present at (and to remember) both real and fictional events that occurred across vast and even imagined geographic locales (Buonanno 19). The limits of physical space no longer solely determine who we are, or what we remember.<sup>8</sup> Dislocated televisual experiences transcend physical geography (Buonanno 86) and, in fact, “where TV confronts the real, or Being, it is no longer easy to say where real ends and the deviation, distortion or diffusion begins” (Dienst xii). In Brum’s case, the two are permanently intertwined.

This phenomenon is not limited to a two-engine fire station, of course. ‘Telescoping elastic-space’ can describe nearly any media-imprinted monument, cityscape, building, or region.<sup>9</sup> The Vasquez Rocks (Agua Dulce, California) are another excellent elastic-point, capable

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<sup>8</sup> Maine artist Matthew Meyer had a connection to, and familiarity with, the California desert, as referenced in *The Cascade*... though he had never personally been there. His landscape-memory was informed (even created) by the site’s televisual presence. Thus, he related to the artwork, and its referenced sites, through this personal filter. His associations with the desert were mediated through the fabricated specter of popular culture, and this dimensional play between public and private memory is vital to *The Cascade*...

<sup>9</sup> It can even encompass entire nations and national identities. The image of America presented to non-Western cultures, by way of media distribution, carries with it the kind of interpretive sense of space-place locative media can imply. American heroes and theories, frustrations and ideologies are packaged, either overtly or as blended subtext, within American televisual products. The televisual information become exports subject to a space-place that affects how ‘outsiders’ understand, perceive, and even expect America to behave.

A mentor of mine originally viewed *The Wonder Years* in India, before moving to the United States. Set in the 1970s and idealistically scripted for a 1980s Baby Boomer audience, the dramedy presented a non-specific, typified American suburban pseudo-reality that my mentor understood as a factual representation of life in America. In this case, his understanding of American socialization was heavily influenced by the ‘Anywhere, USA’ fantasy that itself was tied to a non-indexical (and metaphoric) version of a typical suburban landscape. He later showed his wife, also from India, the series, in order to give her an idea of what American children experienced in school—though most viewers, myself included, recognized the saturated, sentimental and fabricated nature of the content.

of referencing the collision of the personal-historical and the ubiquitous, packaged nature of ‘experience’ through Hollywood. Google it and you find a wormhole of interrelated and meta-referential material—including screen captures from *Star Trek* “Arena” (Gorn vs. Kirk!), scenes from *Star Trek the Next Generation* (which meta-references “Arena”) and *The Big Bang Theory*, the latter of which features characters in Star Fleet uniforms, performing a media pilgrimage to the site of *Star Trek* filming fame, as they operate within a fictional superstructure that recognizes both the ‘realness’ of the national park and the media-memory embedded in both viewer and character (inciting future imitation of the imitation).<sup>10</sup> The literal Hollywood-referent site collapses past and present, personal and cultural, underscoring the idea that the Vasquez Rocks are part of a lived, regional experience, even as they embody a semi-fictional fantasy-space which can literally be traveled to, but which requires some act of memory or fabrication to complete the connection. In a broader sense, these memory-resident sites take on a mythical status, a link to the lore of Americana itself (Bourriaud 97). Both fire station and rock formation embody a telescoping rift of extant space, imagined worlds, and personal history.

Television happens in (and affects) *real* space, in real time, no matter the resulting moments and relationships. The fire station is real. The rocks are real. They are subject to the passage of geologic time and human intervention. Scholar Johanna Drucker suggests “every photograph has temporal dimensions... the time of exposure, historical time, time of development, cropping, the time of reception and circulation—like any other cultural artefact... caught in a web of ‘varying temporalities’ (Drucker 23). This can be expanded to television

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<sup>10</sup> Beyond Hollywood references, the photo deluge includes pets and campers, models and postcards, run-of-the-mill landscape photography, fan remakes of TV sequences, selfies, digital manipulations and official park materials. This whirl of media tourism—fun in itself, is more compelling when we consider the way sites become iconic memory connections between fiction-reality and physical space.

representation, which is composed of similar temporal dimensions, including the time it takes to film, edit, cut, score, playback, broadcast, syndicate, and so on. The image and its time-sandwich, moving or still, becomes an experiential *event*. Every reference, episode, story—every encounter with people, the physicality of stucco, bricks, urban density, coastal industry and desert canyons overlay the site-platform, viewable as a collapse of points into one presence; a *present* that identifies, even revisits, its own history, fiction and future.

*The Cascade: Moments in the Televisual Desert* extends this flexible, television-inflected space beyond the metaphoric Station 127 to encompass greater Los Angeles County, with its juxtaposed urban-desert environment, endlessly indexed through the specter of Hollywood. I am interested in this landscape as a site of personal, cultural and social exchange—mediated through programs that were filmed there during the height of Hollywood.<sup>11</sup> As a child, I recognized the collision of my lived reality-space with the fiction of televisual time—the TV screen mirrored my sense of place. Famous programs played out in familiar environments—stores, streets, freeways and regions, forming a simulacrum of my world, or perhaps a wholly present extension of it. This virtual landscape, collaged and montaged, deflated the distance between broadcast and reality, in some ways nullifying the distinction. Theorist Alfred Shutz suggests—there are “multiple realities” in our life-worlds (Shutz, qtd. in Buonanno 75); media-inflected wormholes that form who we are. For Shutz, “TV’s imaginary worlds flow with everyday life; it blurs separateness between orders of reality.” (77), co-existing in multiple states. The TV-mediated landscape becomes a permeating condition not limited to Mojave Desert locals, extending a

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<sup>11</sup> The height of Hollywood-in-Hollywood. Now ‘Hollywood’ as televisual concept includes countless production sources. The project may be rooted in my personal connection to Los Angeles County, but it is important that the landscape of my childhood was itself the body of Hollywood. By 1960, American television *was* Hollywood (Newcomb 34).

collage of interpretive micro and macro relationships made possible by telescoping elasticity—as each viewer navigates their own media wormhole.<sup>12</sup>

Video works from *The Cascade*... deal with this wormhole effect, tackling the fusion and fracture of landscape as it encounters the language of television. To develop videos, I use footage sourced from a handful of television programs filmed in LA County, mutating and manipulating clips in order to emphasize a pervading sense of landscape as root (and catalyst) for media-site experience. I cross-reference actual locations, excavating instances of city and desert, action and interaction, in order to collapse, condense and entangle sequences that defy narrative resolution. Elements tumble in a time-warp montage, flirting with story, yet existing only as suggestions linked by place and space. Events may be concurrent or overlaid on the same spot with years, hours, moments or only seconds between instances. Thus, connections repeat, fracture, loop and expand, folding moments back in on themselves as if caught in a transient spin.

*Encounter* (Fig. 3) provides an almost theatrical, yet televisual, experience that suggests the rich mythology of the supernatural desert—a well-circulated cultural memory-myth. A web of events occur along the same strip of desert highway, collapsing televisual time around an endless night. The ambiguity combines memory and fantasy as characters negotiate a sequence of encounters—from the suggestion of alien abduction and military conspiracy to the complexity of interpersonal relationships. Familiarity with the original source material is not necessary, as the language of television remains—as does our cultural awareness of 'encounter' tropes. The unstable event 'simulcasts' multiple points in telescoping space<sup>13</sup>—actions and events taking

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<sup>12</sup> The impact of media-memory on the relationship to site is a textured, multi-faceted web that affects those who lived in the depicted spaces, as well as those who only saw it through television, including others mentioned throughout this paper, like Matthew Meyer, Jorge Reyes, Jeff Brum and members of the Dwight Schultz Fansite.

<sup>13</sup> The site is actually the Vasquez Rocks National Park.

place in simultaneity, yet with a fleeting sense of before, during and after: “something happens, is happening, goes on happening...” (Drucker 25). These traces are once removed from their physical location by the original filming, again removed by the act of capturing a temporal instant, then re-entangled with an incomplete, cross-time patchwork. The mutative environments thus inhabit the actual, the imagined and the transient place of recollection, emblematic of a collapsed space conflating personal history, geologic reality and cultural mythology.

The videos attempt a kind of hybrid memory experience; history interceded by television. Repetition even invites the viewer to experience a certain *déjà vu*, as characters repeat motion sequences and camera zooms. Movement and layers suggest time, though there is no single, grounded moment—instability, ambiguity and contingency speak to the unreliability of memory, geology and Hollywood fabrication. The videos play on theorist Margaret Sundell’s suggestion that “we encounter the struggle to represent ‘what it might be like to momentarily inhabit the gap between an object’s existence and our ability to pin it down” (qtd. in Farr 21). It reminds us that for every act of recollection, every fictional performance, there is a physical and experiential subtext—and that media affects our understanding of history, myth, location and identity.<sup>14</sup> In this case, I attempt to activate a telescoping elastic-space by re-entering the language of video.

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<sup>14</sup> YouTube user Jorge Reyes posted an anecdotal, relevant comment on one fan’s filmic documentary of his media pilgrimage to Station 127: “my parents purchased a 1974 Nova at Cormier Chevrolet, and one morning (sometime in the mid 1970’s) my brother and I accompanied my father to the dealer for car service. I suggested to my brother (I was about thirteen years old, and he was around eleven.) to go for a walk around the corner, and we encountered the station looking exactly like the one in the program, and as a firefighter drove in, apparently reporting for duty, I confirmed with him that it was the Emergency station, but it was not Station 51; it was Station 127. I still have the two 110 Kodak film prints, and negatives, that I took that day (I happened to have my Kodak “Hawkeye” 110 camera with me that morning, and I still have that little camera to this day.); one shows my brother in front of the station, and the other is of the refinery-type structures across the street visible on some program exterior scenes.” Reyes’ personal account ties his childhood experiences to both a system of documentation and confirmation, planting then-contemporary experiences with a show he was already familiar with, still currently watching, and which, years later, still stirs site-based recollection.



TV enables an image of history as an “assemblage of dissembled distances from the instantaneous present” in one respect, but the present is always rebuilding itself, and revitalizing the once-old (Dienst 78), just as television constantly cannibalizes its own history in a continuous present.<sup>15</sup> Telescoping elastic-space connects varied points in time, physical space and personal experience, exhibiting the kind of “televisual flux [that] emits a new kind of history—jumbled, familiar, open—which is never yet ours.” (Dienst 78), yet never completely separate from our perception. It is like the distance between the indexical photo and the digital image which can represent that which never existed, while mediating assimilated cultural (and personal memory) in virtuality. The mutable telescope has no beginning and no particular end. Even after the fire station is demolished, the geologic site remains to link a new series of relationships.

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<sup>15</sup> Archived and older television still exists with a strange vitality that eludes even classic cinema. The televisual past gets renewed via the abundance and proliferation of specialized viewing (with growing veracity thanks to genre channels and on-demand delivery). Television is a medium that contains its own history and frequently resurrects and cannibalizes it (Buonanno 21). History becomes constantly mediated by viewing it in the endless present. By re-using television from previous decades, I also re-engage the archive, opening and re-contextualizing material with a personal bend that still grapples with undying media tropes.



Figure 1. Los Angeles County Fire Station 127. Screen capture from *Emergency!* Season 2, Episode 10, “Dinner Date” (1972).

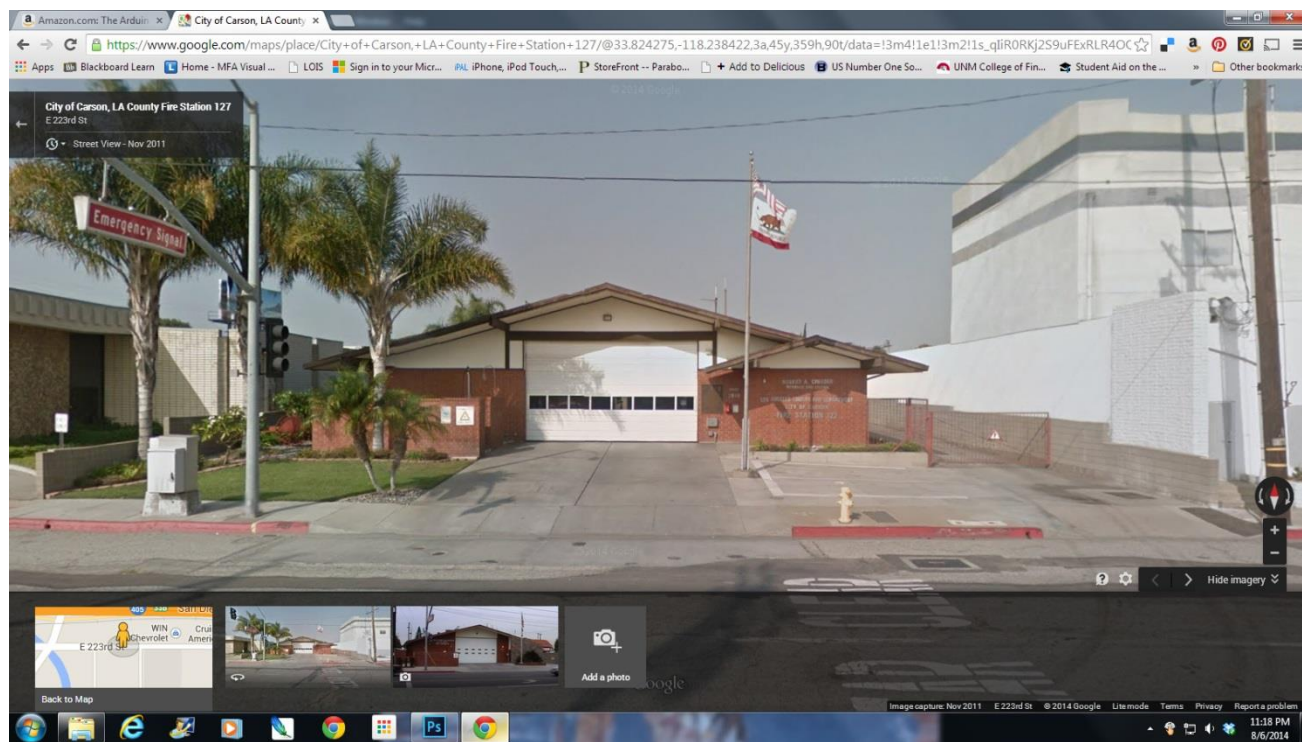


Figure 2. Los Angeles County Fire Station 127. Google Street View. *Google*. Image captured Nov. 2011. Web. Accessed 6 Aug. 2014.



Figure 3. *Encounter* (2014). Ren Adams. Video.

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