On familiarity and defamiliarization in the use of appropriated material in film, and its consequences on narration: a study of Artavazd Peleshian's Our century, Johan Grimonprez's dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y and Adam Curtis' It felt like a kiss

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On Familiarity and Defamiliarization in the Use of Appropriated Material in Film, and Its Consequences on Narration:
A study of Artavazd Peleshian’s *Our Century*, Johan Grimonprez’s *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* and Adam Curtis’ *It Felt Like a Kiss*

by

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Abstract

The text presented here is a study of the editing and appropriation techniques of three constructivist films and their affect on narrative: Artavazd Peleshian’s *Our Century*, Johan Grimonprez’s *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* and Adam Curtis’ *It Felt Like a Kiss*. An analysis of these techniques is done through the lens of the Russian Formalists, Victor Shklovsky and Mikhail Bakhtin and their respective concepts of defamiliarization and familiarization. Attention is paid to formal analysis in relation to historical context.
After we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know it, but we do not see it—hence we cannot say anything significant about it.1

Victor Shklovsky

There is a way to think of meaninglessness as meaning itself, in so far as meaninglessness is a pregnancy of meaning. We get a sense of it. It has meaning in so far as it has sensation. Meaninglessness is not senseless in the way senseless becomes a synonym or stand in for “meaningless.” As much as art as artifice, as a deception or trickery in action or beauty in judgment, often stands in the position of aesthetics as sensing, sense we find has a way of occupying the space of meaning. This we might call perception as the imprint of sense on the body, i.e., meaning.

Perhaps meaning and sense are rightly convoluted here. Their unity is a fractured one often coming to us from origins outside of our ability to recognize or recall their imprint. We see their fragments and then immediately recognize them as fragments and not wholes unto themselves.

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For Victor Shklovsky, the Russian Formalist, “the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” (778). Meaning is something to be slowed down and defamiliarized through what he distinguishes as “poetic language,” a technique he sees as falsely thought of as providing an “economy of mental effort” through thinking in images, as in Symbolism (775-776). To Shklovsky, an image is not a necessarily fixed or “permanent” stand in for changeable experiences (781). Defamiliarization is not a means towards perceiving meaning, but towards creating perception (776). In poetic speech, “we find material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception: the author’s purpose is to create the vision which results from deautomized perception” (783).

In discussing his theory of what he calls “distance montage,” Soviet filmmaker Artavasd Peleshian states, “For me the individual fragments don’t mean anything anymore. Only the whole film has meaning” (“Going the Distance”). In his use of appropriated and original audio and visual materials in his epic film, Our Century, on the space race assembled in the years of détente, we get a sense that this meaning in the whole is a fractured one, assembled together like Frankenstein’s monster. We know when we see the whole that lurking beyond the hills or in another place in another time, in a control room at NASA in 1969 or in a pastoral field in the 1910s or somewhere in the stratosphere, lie the origins of fragments. Peleshian saw this mixing or montage of elements as “a process of creating unity. In a sense I’ve eliminated montage; by creating the film through montage, I have destroyed montage” (“Going the Distance”).

This destruction is a kind of destruction of destruction, what Walter Benjamin describes in the “Destructive Character,” as a character that “obliterates even the traces of
destruction” (302). In Our Century montage repeats in cycles various documents of plane crashes and rocket explosions along with the crowds that anticipate them. Destruction in the form of explosions, in so far as they are cut out and cut up from their own original citational unity, is shredded. By not centering on one rocket launch, one travesty, one astronaut’s attempt to “slip the surly bonds of earth to touch the face of God,”2 by not showing us one explicit recognizable objectified narrative but a rough composite, Peleshian gives us a sense through the repetition of his fragments of how apparently seamless and “unrough” epic stories of heroism come from places and times that are collectively experienced as “our century” but whose reasons for being remain merely suggestive or ephemeral and not recognizably examined. Meaning here is worked through in associated forms of related content. We see the fragments of destruction as an epic unity of partially or vaguely recognizable constituents. Images, to borrow from Shklovsky, are defamiliarized, but they are defamiliarized by being recontextualized into an epic collage of direct and habitually familiar images, images of flight, of heroes, of crowds and of catastrophe.

Here, we might see another layer of complexity added to Shklovsky’s theory of defamiliarization. In the use of appropriated material in collage, we can see the dependence of defamiliarization on familiarity. A habit needs to exist in order to be broken or ruptured. In his essay, “The Ecstasy of Influence; A Plagiarism,” Jonathan Lethem describes the two-fold nature of aesthetic judgment in appropriated material. First, is it transparent? Is the source easily recognizable? Or is the source more subsumed into culture and ubiquitous in the public sphere? Second, is it transformative?

2 from Peggy Noonan’s Ronald Reagan address on the Challenger disaster taken from pilot, John Magee’s poem, “High Flight”
Does it add to the material or the tradition of such material? To Lethem, the success of transparency in the use of appropriated materials will often come at the sacrifice of transformation, and vice versa (93-120). Yet, it can be added that before we can make an evaluative judgment, we need to make an assessment of techniques and operations of memory and its dependence on habit that make transparency and transformation possible. Appropriated material is not necessarily familiar, let alone habitual, but in so far as there is a familiarity of appropriated material as recontextualized, appropriation has references that in their social function become familiar.

Sound and image mixing as a means of defamiliarizing objects or images is now not so defamiliarizing as perhaps it was in Shklovsky’s time. Collage and montage, among the futurists, constructivists and general avant-garde of the early 20th century, was perhaps the technique of defamiliarization. Yet, these techniques have since evolved into an effective habitualizing mode of direct meaning formation. Mixing, collage, the cut up, montage, etc. have become quite habitualized and unconscious in their narrative use, as in for example, rolling 24-hour news channels. Stories and events are told with the idea that viewers will tune in and out, i.e., will not be entirely captive to the story as having a recognizable beginning, middle and end. Stories are cut-up to provide that “economy of effort” on the part of the viewer to follow the narrative and get to the meaning that Shklovsky wishes to keep at bay as long as possible. Negatively speaking, fragmentation in collage mixing in post-modern experience, at times, forms the gap in perception as it creates direct access to meaning. Fragmentation is no longer defamiliarizing. Positively speaking, fragmentation still provides a means of defamiliarizing the familiarity of fragmentation by pointing to the gaps in meaning via direct access to perception.
Here, we might see the meaninglessness of Peleshian’s individual fragments and meaning in unity.

Ephemeral essay filmmaking is often criticized as devoid of narrative in a way dissimilar to the criticism launched at rolling media “narratives,” even by filmmakers famous for their use of ephemeral material for journalistic and documentary purposes. In describing the positive reception by art filmmakers of the use of ephemeral material in his thesis-style documentaries, Adam Curtis, the BBC documentary television filmmaker, describes his weariness (in his own ephemeral techniques) of the disruptive narratives of essay films as in Chris Marker, “[The art lot] don’t do narrative. They say that narrative is a prison because it constricts you and it leads you to one way of thinking and people like me go too much like that and tell you what to think. Whereas what they do is they allow you space to think.” (interviewed by Chris Darke). Criticism perhaps here is launched at the perceived intentions behind narrative fragmentation. Mimicking or “serio-comically” parodying familiar narratives in essay films, including narrative fragmentations, perhaps here makes disruption implied or suggested. In her introduction to the films of Chris Marker, Nora Alter places the essay film in the origins of the written essay in Michel de Montaigne. Alter points out that the Montaignian essay was a “cognitive perambulation and meditation that reflected upon fundamental questions of life and human frailty, tensions and overlaps between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ and their consequences for social order and disorder…Its weapons are humor, irony, satire, and paradox; its atmosphere is contradiction and the collision of opposites.” Alter describes the subgenre of the essay film as even more of a hybrid than the written essay in so far as film can be seen as
falling heavier than literature under the two heavily divided categories of fiction and documentary (or non-fiction) (18).

While the essay format can be defined as this open meditative space of satire and paradox, we find another Russian Formalist, Mikhail Bakhtin, applying the same concepts to another, fictional, literary format, the novel in opposition to what he sees as the closed and contained world of the epic. The novel, perhaps more as a conceptual framework than as a specific genre, is, for Bakhtin, involved in framing and reframing, “crossing the boundary of what we strictly call fictional literature—making use first of a moral confession, then of a philosophical tract, then of manifestoes that are openly political, then degrading into the raw spirituality of a confession, a ‘cry of the soul’ that has not yet found its formal contours” (33). Here, Bakhtin uses the format of the essay as a means for laying out an explicit, more or less unified, thesis concerning the eclectic nature of the novel and its heteroglossia (literally the “word of another”) layers of speech. For Bakhtin, the novel is a development of all genres into one open inclusive immediate contemporary form. Since it is always in the process of development, it sets itself apart from the epic, which Bakhtin sees arising out of an ancient oral tradition which “has come down to us already well-defined and real. We come upon it when it is already completely finished, a congealed and half-moribund genre” (14). Its characteristics are a national epic past or what Goethe and Schiller call “absolute past,” a national tradition as opposed to personal experience and the free thought associated with it, and has “an epic absolute distance” which separates it from contemporary reality (13). It can take on a present-day appearance but in so far as it is depersonalized and unspecific, it has no contextual beginning, middle or end. It does not follow specific consequences but its
own self-sustaining logic. The epic can be picked up and dropped off at any point; one can tune in and out of it and not miss the story.

As a collectively familiar story it situates itself above any contemporary familiarity. People know the epic and absorb it in their speech and memory, but for Bakhtin, its reverence places it ideologically outside familiar contact. For Bakhtin, the novel has been a development of the proximity of what is said to what is talked about. Through satire and irony, reverence as a means of distancing the epic is destroyed. Satire and irony are a means towards a playful intimacy with ideology.³

It is this closeness Bakhtin likens to familiarity, which I would argue works in the same way as Schklovsky’s concept of defamiliarization. Though both Schklovsky and Bakhtin use opposite terms, they both stake their claim to creative perception through the dismantling of unquestioned habit, the habit of “epic absolute distance” for Bakhtin and the habit of the “economy of mental effort” for Schklovsky.

Whether we assign eclecticism to written essays or novels or essay films perhaps is ultimately unimportant if what we are after is a sense of working through meaning by means of “meaningless” forms, that is, by means of appropriating habitualized direct meanings to an open meditation concerning them. This open meditation is perhaps what Peleshian is getting at when he states that he is in the process of creating unity and that only the whole film has unity. Meaning is whole because it is a composite of the fractured elements. Meaning in this sense is not necessarily objectified since the filmic objects from which the fragments are derived must necessarily exist outside the film that

³ As much as satire and irony can be subversive in this intimacy, Theodor Adorno has been quick to point out how easily absorbed satire is to prevailing ideologies, including national ones and how satire can even be seen as present on the side of an omnipresent authority. Adorno, Theodor. “Juvenal’s error,” from Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life. Verso; New York. 2002. P. 209-212.
refers to them. Meaning here takes into account our own habitualized ignorance of meaning as referring to something wholly contained and recognizable. All we are capable of is a composite image.

SUMMARY OF STRUCTURE

This paper attempts to explore this composite unity of appropriated materials in three collaged and ephemeral essay films which use found or archive footage, whose literal individual fragments and sources as well as allusional tropes crossover and through each other: Artavasd Peleshian’s *Our Century* (1983), Johan Grimonprez’s *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1997) and Adam Curtis’ *It Felt Like a Kiss* (2009). All three films use montage or mixing in a way that strive for unity via fragmentation through similar interrelated subjects of grand historical “epic” narratives of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. For the détente era film, *Our Century*, this subject is spaceflight and national heroism, for the pre-9/11 film, *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, it is international airplane hijacking, for *It Felt Like a Kiss*, it is US hegemony and its decaying ideology in the year 1959, 50 years before the film’s assemblage.

Using Shklovsky’s concept of poetic language as the slowing down of meaning, I will show how the use of appropriated fragments in these films slow down the perception of meaning by lengthening the creative process of introducing recognizable collaged elements and mimicking certain habitual literary or artistic genres. Even though these films offer these subjects as recognizable motifs or decorative designs and patterns, they do not give us any objectified and transportable body of historical knowledge. Any
meaning of historical objects of study is to be experienced as sensible form via mechanical ahistorical patterning. This lack of an objective body of history will be shown to disrupt established forms of documentary narratives of history, exposing them as constructed and therefore not objective. At the same time in their ephemeral mimicry of documentary styles, they will also be shown as consciously incapable of providing any explicit alternative to the problems they perceive in media constructions of history. In slowing down the arrival at meaning, they allow for the speculative meditation on their meaning by the viewer, i.e., they allow for the viewer to create their own essay, yet without giving substantial content.

Using Bakhtin’s distinction between the epic and the novel in his *Dialogic Imagination*, I will explore how these films both follow and challenge certain definitions Bakhtin gives to the epic as an absolute and contained past and the novel as a contemporaneous and open-forum heteroglot. I will show how the literalness of heteroglossia in *appropriated* archival film and audio, not just the semblance of many voices and their layers of meaning through literary *creation*, as in the novel, complicates and adds to Bakhtin’s distinction. This will be done through an individual analysis of how each individual film pushes the boundaries of Bakhtin’s theory, including his placement of heroes and protagonists in epics and novels. As all three films explore the effect of patterning of appropriated material on narrative, cited characters derived from disparate and referred contexts will be analyzed as plot-driven devices emptied of their independent agency, as elements in service of montaged and fragmented narratives. They operate like Bakhtin’s non-developing epic hero; yet exist as static images in order to disrupt our expectation of development.
In *Our Century* the definition of epic is played with through the compositing of a national hero through the use and juxtaposition of interchangeable portraits of multiple cosmo/astronauts to create a deceptive semblance of absolute epic unity. The sameness of the appearance of these national heroes, covered equally by the apparatuses of machines of flight, opens up the possibility of the epic hero being devoid of his own individual meaning, while still offering us an epic sublime. *Our Century’s* heroes are the passive experiencers of this flight. As subjects they become composite stand-ins for the composite viewer who also passively experiences flight via the machine of the camera. Here, we will see that there is a way that, while patterning appropriated material from two opposing national identities—the Soviet Union and the United States—aims at disrupting notions of patriotic nationalism and heroism by formally showing the similarities of the technology of the two opposing enemies, such disruption of specific nationalities still falls back nonetheless on a collective absolute epic—“*Our Century*”—as Bakhtin describes it. Yet in mimicking this absolute epic, Peleshian shows us the epic’s sublime emptiness and seductive patterns.

In *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, the distinction between epic and novel is complicated by the voice of an isolated and essaying novelist expressing his envy for terrorists he sees as existing in the communal heteroglossia narrative sphere of the media. Rather than being novelistic, this open-forum multi-tongue of the news media is the epic now of history, while our novel writer protagonist lives outside of history in a sort of self-imposed exile in a series of hotel rooms, experiencing the epic story of the terrorists as patterned transmissions from his television. Through voice-over we are given the subjective familiarity of the novelistic voice in a new news media context, defamiliarizing habits of
perceiving both news and fictional forms of relatively contemporary and historical narrative. The novelist turned meditative essayist absorbs the epic through the collective experience of television, while terrorists, in their active participation in epic history, experience the competition of opposing ideologies and inconclusive ends Bakhtin assigns to novels. Though hijackers, in the creation of their spectacular events, have a definite agency, their (mostly obscured) image representations and repetition empty this agency of the ability to effect historic plot, that is, to be character-driven, as the anonymous novelist imagines them to be.

In *It Felt Like a Kiss*, the placement and use of emblematic 1960s pop songs multiply associations of meaning and competing ideologies through their juxtaposition with images that harken to the closed-off world of a national populist epic, while the written text, which draws a thread through the filmic fragments to create a conscious unifying narrative thesis, questions the abundance of what appears in *It Felt Like a Kiss* as a self-contained epic of images—what the film calls “half-forgotten dreams.” The epic is the eclectic world of pop-songs and images—what Adam Curtis calls “pop trash”—which follow their own internal closed absolute past with an epic cast of place-holder celebrities and political figures including: Rock Hudson, Saddam Hussein, Lee Harvey Oswald, Doris Day, Enos the Chimp and everyone above level 7 of the CIA.

By working through the theories of Russian Formalism with essentially postmodern films of image and sound consumption, even the Soviet-era *Our Century*, this paper aims at the confluence of a school of theories and set of artistic film practice that are all born out of the opening up and ever expanding world of mass-produced and mass-disseminated media in their respective historical times.
And one day in the spring of 1918…returning from a train station. There lingered in my ears the sighs and rumble of the departing train…someone’s swearing…a kiss…someone’s exclamation…laughter, a whistle…, voices, the ringing of the station bell, the puffing of the locomotive…whispers, cries, farewells…And thoughts while walking: I must get a piece of equipment that won’t describe, but will record, photograph these sounds. Otherwise it’s impossible to organize, edit them. They rush past, like time. But the movie camera perhaps? Record the visible…organize not the audible, but the visible world. Perhaps that’s the way out?  

Dziga Vertov

In the Armenian Soviet filmmaker, Artavazd Peleshian’s *Life* (1993) we are able to catch glimpses through shaky telephoto lenses, close-ups of a face, a face of a person going through some sort of experience we cannot fully understand. We are too far away. The camera moves too much. At times objects, machines, apparatuses used for the purpose of the individual’s experience obscure our vision of the face, just as the arm of someone off camera around the face and the overexposure of light make any sense of individuality of the subject of the shots impossible. We know that the person connected to the face is the center of attention, the center of action, the reason why the machines and people make it next to impossible for the camera to capture or document the scene,

let alone participate. The camera respectfully invades the individual’s experience we can only assume to be intense. We can only experience another’s experience from a distance, a distance that is cut up, repeated, devoid of any specific context, yet we know what we are seeing. The face turned slightly away from the camera scrunches up in profile as the individual exerts pressure to something unseen. The face moves slightly forward for a few seconds then relaxes back down, rocking side to side as both face and camera either refuse or are unable to pause long enough in each other’s presence.

A mother is giving birth.

We can assume this because we see something like a hospital gown emerging from around a face with long hair that tightens and relaxes, tightens and relaxes. All the clues are half presented to us with a title that hits us over the head in the beginning. Everything points to childbirth, yet surprisingly we are kept at a distance, forced to make assumptions as to what we are seeing. Then the newborn baby is shown, obscured itself by the splashing water of what can be assumed to be its first bath. Then the obscured faces of mother and child are shown in clear portraiture roughly a year later, each the doppleganger of the other, the same slightly parted lips, the same dark brown eyes staring freeze frame at the camera, separated only by age. Just as we are able to become familiar with the protagonists, just as we begin to see clearly a face we have been straining to study and recognize for the past six minutes side by side with the face of what was causing her intense physical exertion, the credits roll and the film ends. Seeing the faces of those involved, the mother and child, become less intense than when we could barely make out any specific individuality at all.
This relation of the non-specific to emotional intensity becomes the driving force in the film construction of what Peleshian himself has referred to as “distance montage,” where the individual fragments lose their individual meaning and only in the whole can one find meaning. In order to understand why and how Peleshian came to this idea of film construction, it is necessary to see his work in relation and opposition to the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein’s theory of collision montage.

In Peleshian’s criticism of Eisenstein’s collision montage, the explicit creation of recognizable signs through montage keeps montage in film, i.e., in service of something and greater grander than montage, in the service of an epic story on an epic canvas. In collision montage, each element must mean something if the film is to mean anything. Montage in Eisenstein, from this perspective, is illustrative of the story and not necessarily constructive. According to Peleshian, montage is not in film but rather is film itself. In this sense the formal means of construction become its end, a teleological end that ultimately in constructive build up is destructive: “by creating the film through montage, I have destroyed montage, no collision, so as a result montage has been destroyed” (“Going the Distance”).

When one uses montage, when one presents cuts of images, images of things in motion including the motion of the camera itself, one is, at least at first, cutting context, not creating it, even if such cuts were originally shot for the purpose of a specific film at hand. It is this context cutting that, in a specific constructive sense, cuts cutting itself, shredding it till it becomes a stream, not of images, but of movement. This idea, theorized by Peleshian we may recognize as not originating with him. It begins with, most notably, another Soviet filmmaker of music and sound with no discernable
narrative, Dziga Vertov. In Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*, we can see clearly how repetition and speed, showing images and taking them away from us as soon as we may get some idea of what the image is of, destroy or make impossible any explicit story. We are given only parts of things which somehow are to show us that a day begins, things happen, then it ends. We are given a day in the life of a city. People get up in the morning, doors open for vehicles to come out. People go to work. Trains go by. Women get their hair done. Factories produce material goods. People play sports. The day ends. If images exist as part of a narrative construction, such a narrative construction does not exist to illustrate a story in the most crude and base sense nor does it give structure to an explicit identifiable story. Though the originating idea in Russian Formalism was to find a way of analyzing narrative constructs without regard to ultimate meaning but in relation to an observable story, stressing the importance that narrative as form has over the content or story, it is easy to see in constructivist aesthetic practices (as opposed to theory) how form, especially in film, could destroy a sense of narrative as form for specific content, as Peleshian explicitly states he does.

Perhaps we can see Peleshian’s montage as an elevation of montage rather than its destruction. Peleshian’s films, specifically *Our Century*, perhaps do not destroy meaning in individual elements as Peleshian thinks his movies do, but only appear to do so from the literary standpoint of staged action. Deceptively it is not event, but movement that drives the viewer forward towards intellectual engagement. As a movie ostensibly about spaceflight, there is an unrelenting reliability on appropriated documentary historical film and audio footage of flight throughout the 20th century. Cameras pick up images of Soviet cosmonauts climbing stairs, waving at crowds wishing them luck. US engineers
turn on switches and observe their control panels. Astronauts walk down halls. The clock begins to count down. All the clips Peleshian appropriates are concerned with their own self-contained individual events, each part of a grand staged action happening somewhere outside the film, each is its own leap into the cosmos. When they are collaged together, their private staged spectacles become lost in a mixed composite of repeated shuttle launches, plane crashes, early experiments of aviation, explosions and car pile-ups all made uniform in a stark black and white quality. Even the faces of individual heroes in homecoming parades get lost in the stream of flying paper, abundant flowers and adoring kisses that drown the identity of supposed cosmonaut heroes.

In Our Century, as a whole, this is not a break with a literary tradition of narrative arch in events but a continuation of film with visual and auditory sensations as an underlying structural foundation for the narration in the flow of images. One can only see and hear narrative arcs, big and small, with their abstract sculptural forms in movement, in their genetic code. This is not due to a destruction of montage but a hyperization of montage.

Eisenstein already took the destruction of montage into account in his assessment of KinoPravda and their shredding and destruction of montage, an assessment that can be equally applied to Peleshian. For Eisenstein the thoroughly superficial and speed-up nature of KinoPravda montage does not lend itself to contrast and comparison, to collision, but a concealment of “the neutral epic statement of facts” (36). For Eisenstein, shots in KinoPravda are presented as thematic associations, but in a hyper mode where the viewer “has first to guess what is going on and then become ‘intellectually’ involved in the theme” (37). The viewer is deprived of the emotional effect of perception. There is
a senselessness Eisenstein wants to avoid in the rush to disrupt, slowdown or even obfuscate meaning, but perhaps such senselessness is necessary for Eisenstein’s own agenda. As a means towards challenging the immediacy of bourgeois narratives, Eisenstein advocated associated themes over plot-logic, yet in order to arrive at this Schklovsky goal, Eisenstein advocated that “in the selection and presentation of this material the decisive factor should be the immediacy and economy of the resources expended in the cause of associative effect” (my emphasis) (41). There is a contradiction, or perhaps balance, here that Eisenstein sees necessary for his time. Disruption does not need to be what he sees as alienating. With this in mind there is an odd prediction of filmmaking and social organization Eisenstein makes that I believe not only predicts Peleshian’s *Our Century* in 1983, but also predicts current interactive forms of filmmaking ubiquitous in capitalist consumer culture:

I maintain my conviction that the future undoubtedly lies with the plot-less actor-less form of exposition but this future will dawn only with the advent of the conditions of social organization that provide the opportunity for the general development and the comprehensive mastering of their nature and the application of all their energy in action, and the human race will not lack satisfaction through fictive deeds, provided for it by all types of spectacle, distinguished only by the methods by which they are summoned forth. (43)

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5 We can get a cynical glance at such a future in filmmaking as Eisenstein sees it in the present-day appearance of viral videos, for example, the relatively current phenomena of the Harlem Shake and Gangnam Style along with thematically sound and “neutrally epic” cat blooper videos. In the collective style of imitative viral videos, videos made possible by the conditions of consumer social organization and a mastering of human nature in a very narrow and limited sense, juxtaposition is all anyone is capable of experiencing. Meaning in the inter-active sense is not necessarily slowed down; it can be abandoned altogether for pure sense perception of separate elements. Montage we find can be destroyed in the plot-less actor-less form of exposition. We also find Eisenstein’s predictions allowing for what Vertov advocated in collective filmmaking, “stockpiles of preliminaries.” In 2007 through the concept of preliminaries—both Kino Pravda’s *Man with a Movie Camera* as a script and the creation of an online database—Perry Bard created the processual film, *Man with a Movie Camera; The Global Remake*, a participatory video shot by people around the world who are invited to record images interpreting the original script of Vertov’s *Man With A Movie Camera* and upload them to a website. Software developed specifically for this project archives, sequences and streams the submissions as a film. Anyone can upload footage. When the work streams contributions becomes part of a worldwide montage, in Vertov’s terms the “decoding of life as it is.”
One may not necessarily think of a solar eclipse as determined by the advent of social organization for a mastering of (human) nature, but what if it were, or, at least, appeared to be? What if the transmission of light from the sun were “a fictive deed” provided to the human race by a socially organized spectacle? What if this man-made eclipse were invisible as artifice? In some ways such a socially organized spectacle, especially a scientifically engineered one on the scale of the space race, is of a political nature.

For many confluent reasons, it is easy to mistake Our Century for an apolitical film. Perhaps the biggest reason is its formal treatment of the Cold War space race and history of flying machines. Unless you are specifically looking for such clues, it is hard to read which flying machines and spacesuits belong to the two sides of the postwar conflict, the Soviet Union and the United States. In cropping up close repeatedly to the faces of interchangeable individual astronauts, the flag logos adorning the arms of spacesuits are kept largely out of frame or glossed over. Large Cyrillic letters spelling out CCCP can occasionally be seen crowning the top of space helmets. US Americans pray in viewing stands gazing up into the heavens. Radio relays are played through out as if the Russian and English language transmissions are communicating with each other as part of the same space launch. As both sides flow in and out of each other and appear one and the same, one is easily hypnotized into believing that the two hemispheres are not fundamentally at odds with each other. Not only does Our Century appear to not take polemic sides, but also it seems to erase any contextual trace of political strife. Even when documentary footage of plane crashes, dogfights and carpet-bombing from World War Two flashes across the screen as an unrelenting series of explosions, it is not footage
representative of a geopolitical conflict, but an expression of a collective violent sublimity, with a blatant disregard for the political forces behind the repeated images of destruction.

This, though, does not mean that Our Century is an apolitical film or a film devoid of politics in its theme or in its practical creation. As much as Peleshian tries to distance himself from the epic theater of Eisenstein, it is hard to avoid Eisenstein’s explicit ideas concerning montage as a disruption of plot-logic in favor of a montage of associations for thematic effect, that which

provokes a chain of the necessary unconditioned reflexes that are, at the editor’s will, associated with (compared with) predetermined phenomena and by means to create the chain of new conditioned reflexes that these phenomena constitute. This signifies a realization of the orientation towards thematic effect, i.e., a fulfillment of the agitational purpose. (44)

Eisenstein gives an explicit example of this distinction of plot-logic and a montage of associations for thematic effect in the difference between two kinds of shot assemblages:

Plot-logic, i.e., chain: the gun is cocked – the shot fired – the bullet strikes – the victim falls

Montage of associations: the fall – the shot – the cocking – the raising of the wounded (42)

Here, not just the lack of an obvious direct polemic or thesis, but also the lack of any plot-logic is the basis for agitational purpose. Mechanical provocation of unhabitualized reflexes is a means towards a conception of propaganda.

If we remember Bakhtin’s distinction between the epic and the novel—that the epic follows its own absolute and self-contained logic of events where we can cut in and out of the story and find ourselves not particularly lost as to the cause and effects of action, whereas the novel is open to a logic of possibilities as to cause and effect leaving
us to ask “what happens next?”—then the accusations leveled at Eisenstein by *KinoPravda* ring true. Through a use of montage as thematic association, as a composite of elements, Soviet montage does lend itself somewhat to the arcane already dead life of the epic as Bakhtin describes it. This would be true if it weren’t for the fact that this notion of montage is exactly what drew *KinoPravda* and Eisenstein both to film. The compositing of elements provokes unconditioned reflexes, i.e., turns us away from the conditions of plot-logic. Here, we may see the open cause and effect of the novel, as Bakhtin describes it, producing the national absolute past and epic distance, of which thematic association, cut ups, mixing and collage must slow down the immediacy of meaning in order to imagine (agitare) narrative anew. As far as certain Soviet and general avant-garde montage is concerned the novel is the arcane epic of plot dictation, a category Peleshian wishes to place Eisenstein himself in.

What appears in *Our Century* to be an erasing any contextual trace of political strife in the Cold War is a means towards an agitation, towards a propaganda as Eisenstein describes it, as a disruptive collage against familiar plot-logics of historical (epic) narratives. Actions take place but their sequencing never, if at all, follow anything close to the cause-and-effect and open-ended future of the supposedly subversive novel Bakhtin has in mind. Peleshian’s serious mimicry of epic as Bakhtin describes it places *Our Century* in this interesting dual position of allowing viewers to see something like modern warfare as pure aesthetic and (bodily) sense experience, absolute and closed to specific reasons or logics as well as a means of making conscious its own construction as a “neutral” historic epic.
Even if viewed as a history of the 20th Century as a century of flying machines—flying machines dependent on armed conflicts between states for their technical development—the film was created during the decade of détente between the Soviet Union and the United States. In fact, much of what might be viewed as independent recontextualized footage comes from the launch of the first joint Soviet-US space flight Apollo-Soyuz Test Project of 1975, all of which, on the Soviet side, was shot by Peleshian himself, while footage from the US was provided by NASA (“Going the Distance” and Apollo-Soyuz Mission). Lacking any obvious polemic, even the polemic of safe diplomatic propaganda, Our Century easily puts us in the position of the desire to transcend political division by transcending the Earth’s pull. Yet this symbolic transcendence was the staged event of the joint-space program itself. Here we must refer back to the scientifically and socially engineered spectacle of an artificially constructed solar eclipse. Though perhaps not technically used in the film, one of the jobs of the joint launch, besides joining the two sides’ respective satellites, was to position the two space crafts so that the Soviets could take photographs of an engineered eclipse using the circular body of the US Apollo space shuttle as a spherical satellite to block out the sun (NASA, “The Flight of Apollo-Soyuz”). As Our Century simulates the disappearance of a difference between natural and socially organized sublime spectacle, we see an inability to distinguish the methods involved in bringing such spectacles forth.

Working with the formal arrangement of movement in film around this shared human identity in modern engineering, Peleshian’s film, like its US American counterpart, Koyaanisqatsi, transcends being a recognizable trope of propaganda film for
détente or modern humanism in an age of technology by offering us a direct symbolic experience of détente’s utopic vision of technology at the end of the space race. It does not have to tell us what to think or how to feel. It shows us aesthetically in combined terror and elation. Perhaps intentionally, Peleshian makes visible how aesthetically solid and dangerously opaque such impressive sensation in film experience can be, by ignoring the specifics of politics. Just four years after Peleshian shot his original footage of the joint launch, while he was editing Our Century, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and the US backed the Pakistan led Mujahideen, while Team B headed by Richard Pipes leaked its own propaganda to the press that the Soviet Union was ignoring détente’s “mutual assured destruction” and continuing with its nuclear weapons program. By the time Our Century was finished, détente was essentially over.

The paradox of simulated direct symbolic experience operates the same way as the mother giving birth in Life. As with the woman giving birth, we are only given access to such experience by remaining apart from it. Because we are kept distant with our sense of event obscured by quick cuts and repetitions, we want to empathize with the person having the experience for us. In Our Century we become phantoms of the experience of space flight as we see face after face of humans in large bulky suits and equipment performing under extreme physical duress what we ourselves are incapable of doing—being born out of the earth and dying as a collective symbol of our desires without a trace of carnage. In their repeated interchangeable preparations and parades, they die as images even if they survive as earth-bound humans (see fig. 1.1).
At a point half way through we see a series of close-ups of astronauts as they look into the eyes of someone off camera in the crowds around them, smiling in recognition, not to anyone immediately there but to shots of early aviation pilots returning the gaze by juxtaposition as pastoral music swings them across wide open fields (see fig. 1.2).
As the film progresses we become aware, not of the passive experience we have as viewers of others but of the active movement of space and time the camera simulates as leaps. It is not the astronauts that experience space flight but the mobility of the camera freed from the fetters of gravity to space and time. The camera sees the arcs of the solar flares reaching out from the corona of a solar eclipse (see fig. 1.3).

The camera glides over the surface of the moon. The camera exhibits what a wind tunnel does to the face of an unnamed astronaut in training, making the skin flow in slow motion waves, formally comparable to solar flares. The camera is the cinema vérité fly on the wall showing us the banality of logistics and waiting for the staged event. The camera cannot make out who the center of adoration is, blocked by the movement of the crowd and the equal attention and framing given to her and her fellow cosmonaut husband. The camera is the composite hero by showing us what, as an image, cannot exist without it, thereby allowing the viewer to be active in the perception of direct
symbolic experience, more so than the traditional national hero how passively waits, most
often on his back like a mother actively giving birth. The camera shows us that when
sliding back and forth a few frames at a time, a simulated eclipse of the sun can simulate
the beating of a heart.

Here we might see what Peleshian means when he states, “In Eisenstein every
element means something. For me the individual fragments don’t mean anything
anymore. Only the whole film has meaning.” In developing his theory of KinoPravda or
“film truth,” Vertov is dependent on the idea that KinoGlaz or “film eye” is able to see
what the naked eye alone is not able to see. In mechanical production and reproduction,
the camera can make visible motion and movement beyond what can be humanly
possible alone. As a filmmaker, he got his start as an editor and not as a cameraman.
One could see how this could lead him to the idea that film production is dependent on
what he has called his “stockpiles of preliminaries,” the reels of film shot as news
documentation throughout the Soviet Union. In Man with a Movie Camera, we see him
and his crew going to great lengths to create shots at extreme angles. We follow the
cameraman as he shows us what is possible with a film eye. He becomes involved in the
production of the stockpiles, but not their montage. This task was carried out by his wife
as part of a film production collective, Kino-eye.

Montage means organizing film fragments (shots) into a film-object. It means
“writing” something cinematic with the recorded shots. It does not mean
selecting the fragments for “scenes” (the theatrical bias) or for titles (the literary
bias).

Every kino-eye production is subject to montage from the moment the theme is
chosen until the film’s release in its completed form. In other words, it is edited
during the entire process of film production. (88)
In Vertov we can understand Peleshian’s whole as processual in theme development, opposed to a scripted entity for which fragments have been chosen beforehand.

“Every specific element, every frame, has the genetic code of the whole film. There are no accidental shots or frames. Every particular element has been thought out and is representative of the whole.” (“Going the Distance”)

Peleshian used archival footage because it has the impact of fact (“Going the Distance”). It is the genetic code of form and appearance that become representative of the whole. Here every individual element must mean something, but not in epic symbolic representation, but direct symbolic simulation.

Though perhaps one is aware of this in many traditional literary and theatrical film narratives, it is usually music and sound editing that brings direct symbolic simulation to our attention as it sets a mood or provides an attitude through which the viewer understands the impact of images, archival or not. In a most obvious way in *Our Century*, the layers of sound and voices heard as sound along with explicit choices of socially recognizable music take on the job of the literary script, i.e., as the structure for which fragments are selected for “theatrical scenes.” Though they themselves are also appropriated fragments and often at crucial moments not only synch up with but replace image, auditory sensations provide an imposing didactic trajectory of where the flow of images in their selection are going in our contemplation of them. The same minor key of operatic voices that makes the smiles of people bitter sweet, repeated later, makes a failed rocket launch disarming in its elated pleasure coupled with pain. Both expand on screen as something sublime. Jazzy American blooper music becomes the basis for a selection of clips of flying machine inventions consigned to the dustbin of aviation history, Marinetti dreams of crashes of cars already on fire, waterskies and motorcycles sending
their riders flying in the air—images, most of which one can imagine (though never sees) maiming carnage and death while refusing to allow the viewer to dwell on the morbid or bitter-sweet. The music groups the images into a series of relatively human scale disasters or potential disasters. Music reminiscent of the American jazz age becomes the foundation for seeing disaster as a series of stunts on a more individual and therefore farcical human scale as opposed to a collective state level, thereby creating an automatic reactive laugh, though perhaps more people die as a result of these stunts than they do from botched rocket launches. When after a series of climatic orchestral flares and grainy clips of explosions, the camera brings us out into the cosmos where the engineered eclipse, which before rumbled with the sound of engine, seemingly making the camera capturing the outline of the sun shake with fear and awe, now moves as the elegant arch of light in a gliding synthesized moog. Later, this same music will show its genetic code in the gliding jet stream of high altitude fighter jets. As the script for which the images illustrate, music and auditory sensation become less easily detectable as scene structure since it is a genetic code that moves form as much as it becomes the basis for the scene or shot selection of images.

What we are able to see through Our Century is how what we take to be signifying representations in images can also exist in the social connotations of music just as music is likely to make us experience the splicing of images as repetitive patterns. In this way, rather than the heroes of the state being subjects that drive a plot, they become abstract elements captured by the heroic feats of the camera. Viewed from this perspective we can understand what Peleshian means by likening his films to magnetic fields rather than strictly linear flows of images. Like music, forms repeat themselves,
keeping us gravitated to a center. Understood this way, it is not necessary for music to be conceived as linear. Like images, forms become objects we can barely make out as they slip farther away from us. Understood this way, images become the linear distance that separates us from them. The only thing in between is space.
I am sure that Italian judges will understand and forgive an act born from a civilization of aircraft and war violence, a civilization which overwhelmed this uncultured peasant, this Don Quixote without Dulcinea, without Sancho Panza, who instead of mounting his Rocinante flew across the skies.  

Defense Attorney Giuseppe Sotgiu at skyjacker, Raffaele Minichiello's trial, 1971

A boy set up in front of a collection of microphones is asked by a reporter what his first experiences were with the guerrillas on the airplane, did he have a chance to talk with them?

- Yeah, they were real nice.
- Did they express an interest in your thoughts about what they were doing?
- Oh yeah, they said that, um, that was their life, what they were doing, you know, fighting.
- Did you feel menaced by all the weapons around you?
- No.
- No? Were you frightened in anyway during this experience?
- No, he smiles.
- Did you have a good time?
- Yeah, I had a good time.
- Would you do it again?
- I don't know, I'd probably miss too much school.

From dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y

In Our Century, when anyone speaks, it’s as a sparse series of disembodied voices over radio transmissions, caught in the static of such transmission. They are incapable of being clear, even if we understand English or Russian. Perhaps we understand “control panel, check,” but only as a reference to logistical communication. We can understand panic and excitement, but it is in the timber of a voice. Speech is sucked into the background with the sounds of engines roaring and clocks ticking down. Speech is not an act, an expression or a thought but a noise. It is not equal to sound as a category of

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communication, but a microscopic element of it. The hidden or camouflaged treatment of speech perhaps does not diminish it, as if it could be more prominent, but rather reflects how speech is received in both a technical and literal sense as with Yuri Gagarin’s radio transmissions back to earth from orbit or how it is received when thought is circling around what is being said, capturing speech as a fleeting sonic image.

With *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, Johan Grimonprez’s pre 9/11 film about another group of protagonists of the sky, airplane hijackers, we are presented with several layers of complexity to the reception and perception of speech in audio-visual format. If *Our Century* shows how shots of astronauts can work as stand-ins for a composite image of a singular hero, much as the masses around the hero become one entity, *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* shows what happens when such grand silent heroes, in this case hijackers, can only be understood by the voices that talk around them, describing them, analyzing them, condemning and spectacularizing their unseen presence aboard airplanes. Speech is not literally shoved into walls of sound in flight, but is woven into concepts of character and action in news event theater: the narrative voiceover of an expository thesis, and the well traveled, world-weary subject protagonist of two Don DeLillo novels in relation to the object spectacle of terrorists with local grievances on a global stage.

The repetition of eyewitness accounts is the neutral chorus, relaying what has transpired on the stage inside the unseen space of the aircraft. Hubert Brill, a Pepsi Cola

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7 Yuri Gargin, voice of the first human being in space, April 12, 1961, “I can see the earth. Visibility is good. Can hear you excellently. Flight proceeds well. I can see the earth. Visibility is good … I can see everything. Some of the space below is overcast with cumuli … I am continuing in flight. Everything is normal. Instruments are functioning excellently. Everything is in good order. My flight is progressing … Feeling fine. My spirits are high. I am continuing in flight. Everything is going well. The machine is functioning normally.” Conley, Brian and Christopher Cox, curators. “Lift” in Cabinet Magazine. Issue 11, Summer 2003. Accompanying CD, track 2.
executive describes what it was like being in the cabin of a 727 with over a hundred
people for three days:

   It was a gambit of very many emotions, from surprise to shock to fear, to
joy to laughter and then again fear at the end, yes, and almost
tragedy…actually it wasn’t that bad at all, it wasn’t that small. A 727 is
fairly comfortable. (dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y)

Then the chorus of headline text relays in, while two men lean out of the cockpit window
of a commercial jet:

   SAMURAI SWORD AT PILOT’S THROAT! South Korean airport
disguised as North Korean base to mislead hijackers. Set up fails:
American jazz radio gives ploy away. (dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y)

Pepsi Cola executive again:

   They wanted to create a new revolution around the world. They were
going to North Korea for training, they thought, and some further
education politically, and then on to Cuba. (dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y)

Later, a boy in glasses describes a group of hooligans he met that were all right, he
guessed. Still later, in 1985, a radio relay in Beirut describes, “They are beating the
passengers, they are beating the passengers. They are threatening to kill them now, they
are threatening to kill them now. We want the fuel now, immediately!” A middle-aged
American woman chimes in, “They turned around and the gun went up in the air and the
hand grenade with one fella and the other fella just had a hand grenade. And they start
screaming in Arabic, so I said to myself, this is it. It’s a hijacking,” scratching her nose
with her finger. Eye-witness accounts provide descriptions as they weave in and out with
bombastic rhetoric from politicians, a reenactment and lecture from a sky marshal trainer,
newsreel announcers, a woman being held down by two people as she screams for her
baby, even-headed recounts of emotions in a recent hostile situation (*dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*). Though they are the ones who absorb the most shock of experience, coming close to unexpected death, the recently released hostages are the most poised and unperturbed (see fig. 2.1). They are the tertiary characters, though in some ways they are given the most ample airtime, while hijackers themselves are seen but rarely heard from as with Peleshian’s cosmonauts.

![Fig. 2.1. Stills from Johan Grimonprez, *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (Belgium, 1997)](image)

Bakhtin gives an analogy of heteroglossia in the novel, in the way in everyday speech, most speech or stories concern what has been said elsewhere. To speak about something is to transmit speech as content. What is our speech, our voice is a means of content transmission and not concerned with forms of representation. (338). The introduction of concern about the form transmission takes is a concern of ideological becoming, whether authoritative or internally persuasive or both. Authoritative discourse is in the position of what he labels elsewhere as “epic.” It is distant and can only be wholly accepted or rejected. When speech enters into an internally persuasive ideology, it enters as an object, something authoritative discourse can enter, but only as an object, a relic, a calcified thing, something deprived of its authority. As a discourse in full control of its authority, authoritative discourse cannot be represented (as object), only transmitted
(as content). Though in such a state, one might think transmission necessitates authority to possess objecthood, this object is a framing, a superstructure, a representation already and, therefore, cannot be further represented unless it enters the dialogical realm of the internally persuasive.

In *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* we see and hear eyewitnesses relaying accounts recently unfolding aboard airplanes hijacked to Cuba as transmitters of information. Yet this information is presented as part of a formal(aic) pattern, an imitative framing complete with nostalgic bleeps and screenwipes in image transitions prevalent a few years before the time of the hijackings (see fig. 2.2). As a means to point out the formulaic aspect of news reporting and image cut, not as it existed in the 1960s and 70s, the time of Cuban hijackings as an example, but as Grimonprez saw it becoming through cable television, the remote control and image recontextualizing in the 1990s, *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* does not defamiliarize or slow down meaning in a literal and initial interpretation of Schklovsky’s poetic or artistic language, but rather accelerates the familiarization of what is already familiar in the discourse of television. In other words, the content of what is historically referenced (Cuban hijackings) is framed in image transitions from yet another, earlier, time period at a contemporary speed (see fig. 2.2). This does not defamiliarize but provides a remixing of repeatable sound bites and image transitions that have, in their form, saturated the possibilities of defamiliarizing images through remixing.
As image cuts and (more importantly) whole patterns of mixing as images themselves, the tertiary level of the chorus, already cut and contextualized in their original broadcast, are emptied of their direct significance. We do not see eyewitness accounts as objects serving the authoritative discourse but as objects representing their transmission patterning. This refiguring perhaps becomes a Bakhtinian parody, an imitation of style, in that it dissects, in that it sees the front and back of such transmissions, but this parody as a mimic is not, in Grimonprez’s thinking, a deconstruction; therefore, criticism is more implicit than explicit. If Grimonprez imitates style, it is because the news as a transmission of information has already adapted to the authoritative aesthetics of representation of Hollywood and MTV.

Reverberating beyond the chorus in *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* are the quaternary characters Martyn Colebrook refers to as “different groups—corporations, states, terrorists, and indeed writers” engaging in “(counter-)hegemonic activities” via “images.” (130). The characters are echoes of ideologies out further in the world than the images
such groups may not necessarily create themselves but nevertheless use. It is also at this equal level that Grimonprez imagines consumers of mediated images, especially in television, where they can channel surf, go back and forth between programs waiting for a commercial to end, switching around interests, essentially becoming a transient editor of ideologies through the transient consuming of images. This habit, according to Grimonprez, was then taken into account by television programmers. Programming was further cut up making channel surfing for the sake of skipping commercials difficult, and especially for the news, became a format where viewers can drop in without losing the narrative thread. “No need to zap anymore; the network did it for us” (42). If *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* is able to defamiliarize anything through an implicit criticism, it perhaps is the Bakhtinian distinction of authoritative and internally persuasive discourse.

If we were to move towards the center of the action, we find two characters competing for main protagonist, constantly trying to force the other into a secondary role—the calm clear eloquence of the voiceover narration and the seen, though rarely heard, hijackers. It’s hard to tell which is a figment of the imagination of the other. As we watch footage of Rima Tannous Eissa in her Israeli cell, the younger of the two narrative voiceovers relays the confessional voice of the reclusive novelist addressing a ubiquitous non-existent audience:

The way they live in the shadows, live willingly with death. They way they hate many of the things you hate. Their discipline and cunning. The coherence of their lives. The way they excite admiration. If society is reduced to blur and glut, terror is the only meaningful act. There’s too much everything, more things and messages and meanings that we could use in 10,000 lifetimes. Is history possible? Is anyone serious? Who do we take seriously? Only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith. Everything else is absorbed. Only the terrorist stands outside. (*dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*)
If Peleshian’s movies are provided their structure through patterning in auditory sensory, so does *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, but with verbal voiceovers concerning a fictional protagonist that in a disjointed way mimic what Eben Wood says is a reminder of “the role that resolution plays in the documentary, and indeed, in media narratives generally” (254). The voiceovers in *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* act as the literary script for which scenes are selected, creating the reality of the fantasy of one subjective protagonist as unseen as the terrorists he describes with an envy sometimes are themselves. The voiceovers do not elucidate an expository claim even as, and perhaps especially because, they move towards an essay where subjectivity is inherently framed as a recognizable novelistic fiction.

Instead of using the novels of Don DeLillo, *Mao II* and *White Noise* as the content for a representational film adaptation of fiction, the film in its appropriative mode changes the words of the novels as text into an aural essay relayed by two male voices, one older and cynical, the other young and on the brink of his illusions being shattered. Sometimes one takes the subjective first person, while the other takes the third, switching narrative perspective. What was the descriptions by a female photographer of her own traveling habits and idiosyncrasies in *Mao II* become a disembodied description of a male writer by a voiceover which will from time to time speak as the writer himself. The expository mode of the essaic voice and fictionally bracketed one move into each other’s territory already in the appropriated DeLillo text, while the film mixes this further in the rebranding of pronoun agencies and insertion of DeLillo’s texts as argumentative sound bites: “Shouldn’t death be a swan dive?” “All plots tend to move deathward.” “There
must be something in family life which produces factual error” (dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y). We see what the writer protagonist refers to in images, but neither writer nor image supply any resolution for each other. Death as it is continually referenced never dies, never explodes, never reaches absolute time.

Unlike Vertov’s Kino-eye, scenes are selected for a written script, but like Vertov, the text is appropriated as cuts of recontextualized preliminaries, as elements of the collaged film-object and not strictly as a script for adaptation. Somewhat paradoxically, the appropriated aural narration presents itself as the subjective fantasy glue holding all the stockpiles of an objectified mediated history together. It holds that history out to us like resolution concerning death as the countdown operates in Our Century, and like Our Century, memory repeats moments of mediated history, history as a stockpile of Vertov’s preliminaries to be consumed as if they were a stockpile of “finally realities” or resolutions to be endlessly experienced by proxy of the image.8

The isolated subject when relaying thoughts via the voiceovers is always concerned about a terrorist much like himself, that is, isolated.

We understand how reality is invented. A person sits in a room and thinks a thought and it bleeds out into the world. Every thought is permitted and there’s no longer a spatial or moral distinction between thinking and acting. Stories have no point if they don’t absorb our terror.

Put a man in a room and lock the door. There’s something serenely pure here. Let’s destroy the mind that makes words and sentences. Gain the maximum attention. They’d probably kill you ten minutes later, then photograph the corpse and keep the picture handy for the time it can be

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8 Christian Haenggi speaks similarly about this relation of the singularity of catastrophe and the sublime to repetition of image: “The World Trade Center, the gigantic twin phallus of capitalism, inspired by its very monumentality a feeling of awe, a feeling of sublime excitation. To see it castrated by a flying man-made monument, that is, progress turned into destruction, a missive turned into a missile, gave the viewer a doubly sublime thrill, a lustful and invigorating fascination which could only be exorcized by endless repetition.” “The greatest work of art”: Karlheinz Stockhausen and 9/11” Interventions symposium at Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, 31 July 2011
used more effectively. Then the bomb went off—instantaneous worldwide attention. *(dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y)*

Alvin Lu reminds us that the difference between novelists and film directors is that while film directors perceive things in terms of conspiracy theories with interrelated social interests (perhaps as the social novel once did), novelists (of modern subjectivity) “go for the lone gunman theory. The lone gunman plots in his dingy, unfurnished room, trapped in chaos, cut off from history.” Presumably, one can think, this lone gunman (theorist) has a television in his dark room, which transmits to him the echoes of the speech acts of the quaternary characters of the film director’s “large and complex cast” of ideologies (195). The artistic representation in *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* of the writer’s ideas is an implied intimacy of confession, an intimacy the writer views as an already failed internal persuasion of ideology. Our writer sees bomb makers and gunmen in their explicit criticism as making “raids on human consciousness, what writers used to do before we were all incorporated” *(dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y)*.

Here, the implied criticism in the mimicry of media narratives, though perhaps feeling defeated, points to the *non-verbal speech* of the terrorists engaging in the heteroglot world of transmitted media narratives (see fig. 2.3).
In *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* it is very easy to *not* pay attention to the absence of verbal speech on the part of hijackers, and when two do speak (apart from logistical radio transmissions of direct demands and the mumbling last words of a half-dead young man held up in a dingy room, both of which are barely audible) their arguments, taken as sound bites sound as humdrum and uninspiring as any other talking head diluting arguments into easily digestible form as it appears in the film:

First, Mouna Abdel-Majid
For you westerners, you don’t understand. You have all the Israeli propaganda. You think the Arabs, they are the dirty Arabs and of course we have to fight outside our territory and get the world to understand our case. (*dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*)

And then Adel Abdel-Majid later

It is not hijacking, let's say. You should say, it's trying to tell the people what's our problem. I mean, all this 20 years, none of you foreigners had even known that there exist people called Palestinians. 2 million human beings, they had been thrown out of their homes, of their land, of their pride, of everything for 20 or 23 years. (*dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*)
As much as the writer protagonist offers no clear resolution, neither do any of the entities involved in media narratives, even as media narratives offer themselves up as possible intentions or commitments for a future.

In their descriptions of localized grievances, the two Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine commandos quoted above address on a global public platform an unseen audience of “you westerners” and “you foreigners.” As television interviews with the direct address of the word “you,” we see the terrorists addressing those whom they imagine will consume their more effective image spectacle than they will their own words. Hijacking here is an imagistic speech with a specific audience. Or viewed another way, as much as the reclusive writer imagines that only the terrorist lives outside, he forgets that the terrorists are just as “reduced to blur and glut.” The terrorist, too, is incorporated into the overabundance of meaning our protagonist writer himself would like to terrorize and destroy. If we can understand the word “hero” as Hannah Arendt sees it in its Homeric definition (a definition that is ironically itself a collective mediated authorship), a hero is one who possessed the willingness to tell one’s story, a willingness held by both coward and brave man alike (189), the terrorist—standing outside or apart in order to tell a story through a destruction of surroundings—needs an audience that is ultimately set apart itself. The terrorist in a heroic act needs the media and ultimately needs an overbearing hegemony, of which the media is a part, to oppose, but this opposition is a superficial one. Like Peleshian’s cosmonauts, the ephemeral presence on and off throughout dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y of interchangeable faces, of airplanes stuck on tarmacs, of repetitive points of action the masses surround to see ultimately do not stand
out as final realities but as an overabundance of disposable heroes in what Grimonprez calls “supermarket history” where “people do not purchase products but rather buy an experience of the accompanying ad” (279), i.e., buy a narrative.

Through what Grimonprez calls “zapping,” flipping through channels, especially during commercial breaks, the film mimics what might be the channel hopping habits of our writer protagonist if he had more control over his preliminary options for consumption, i.e., if he had an unlimited external and prosthetic Proustian voluntary memory.

In mimicking rather than deconstructing, Grimonprez sees his criticism more as implicit rather than explicit since stylistic frames for varying narratives have folded in on each other. The news has become a soap opera, end credits seamless segues into the next show.

The ideology of zapping could be defined as a new sort of Brechtian rupture. It can be an extreme form of poetry, going much further than collage. It reflects the television vocabulary that was online during the Gulf War: Reporting was all mixed up—baby diapers and politics, ketchup and smart missiles, commercials between images…This spectacle replaced critical distance. (229)

If collage in its image, textual, spoken and auditory forms was introduced as a form of critical distance at the beginning of the 20th century, this was because it was reflective of what was already being experienced, especially in media disseminated to wide masses. In a way, it was not disruptive but refractive passing through mediums of varying densities as mass media has absorbed rupture as a means to maintaining attention by being “zappable,” by being already in a state of zapping itself. In this situation, one can see Grimonprez’s choice of implicit over explicit criticism as perhaps the more subtle and
complex form of judgment, where the novelist as someone who once thought of novels as subversive of ideologies, like Bakhtin did, must resign themselves to seeing parody as already subsumed in the inter-changeable epic of media narrative.

As a mimic of form and style, *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* does not, and perhaps cannot, tell us a thesis. It does not give us an objectified account of airline hijacking. Nor does it offer a direct way of interpreting hijacking or thinking about death spectacles. As a mimic of selling an experience, it must be an experience where zapping and cuts, the ironic use of music, the bittersweet juxtaposition of an introspective voiceover and rushing crowds of people all follow the readable collage code of post-modernity, not in a way to hide the narrative as a constructed reality but to make the Frankenstein-like heteroglossia of, specifically, television require thoughtful interpretation unabsorbed by the seemingly seamless coherence of style in media narratives, i.e., mediated histories.

If the collage effect in contemporary mass media is readable and is approached in its spliced production towards some coherence of message, it does not necessarily follow that an explicit script has been written beforehand. In fact, if audio/visual mediums are the means by which different interests participate in power, any narrative via such means cannot be written out beforehand. The pre-written script, which many early Soviet constructivist filmmakers viewed with suspicion of bourgeois ideology, is perhaps only plausible some hundred years later through reconstructed or collaged means.
When a nation is powerful it tells the world confident stories about the future. The stories can be enchanting or frightening but they make sense of the world. But when that power begins to ebb the stories fall apart and all that is left are fragments which haunt you like half-forgotten dreams.

-It Felt Like a Kiss, 2009
Adam Curtis

There is a film of dubious origin. It is simply titled Propaganda, uploaded by a user named sabineprogram, who claims to have been given it in Seoul by a couple claiming to be North Korean defectors (sabineprogram, Propaganda | Full English Version (2012)). It opens with a shot reminiscent of Peleshian’s Life. A woman is lying down on a bed, crying and carrying on. “I want help. I do, I want help” (see fig. 3.1).
The clip does not last long until we are bombarded with image after image. Images that are banal spectacles: an fluttering eye, cluster bombs, news reporters, a bling fashion show, Katie Perry, Colin Powell, entertainment title graphics, George Bush in his flight suit, faux-lesbians in a music video, Ronald MacDonald ringing the bell for the NYSE, etc. In fact, the rest of the film flows on without changing the same pace and level of bombardment of images for another hour and a half, while the voiceover lays out an indictment against western capitalism and the various ways in which it uses illusions, fear, religion, ownership of the means of production, emulating psychosis, rewriting history, systematizing propaganda, cover ups, complicity, censorship, etc. to carry out its hegemonic agenda, a critique that strikes the viewer as rising out of an experience of
capitalism itself and incorporated back into the euthanizing psychological warfare of western propaganda—but it exists in a vacuum.

Watching image after image and listening to the ideas the images reinforce, one could easily mistake the film as by someone who worked with Adam Curtis, the BBC documentarian and self-proclaimed libertarian. Though the use of images have a similar effect as Adam Curtis—ironic or whimsical to counter the euthanizing effect the bombardment of aesthetic images has on a media saturated culture—it lacks a virtuoso handle on that effect along with any nuance of argumentation one sees in such Curtis films as *The Power of Nightmares, Century of the Self* and *All Watched over by Loving Machines of Grace*. It appears as if someone watched all his documentaries and—whether propagandists from North Korea with experience saturated in online culture and internet access coupled with download capacity or whether a US American film student or whether a leftist South Korean 9/11 truther—they decided to mimic Curtis’ image effects along with his topics and content of investigations into the historical origins of certain modern political ideologies.

In fact, the film is a mockumentary from New Zealand of critical tropes. (Van Beynen, “Shunned as North Korean spy”) Its lack of nuance is skillful in presenting a recognizably formulaic critique that is incapable of self-reflection and therefore can only see a system of power as absolute and not as arising out of social conditions. As a mockumentary of totalizing ideologies whether of a Spartan-like North Korea or anti-Council on Foreign Relations conspiracy theorist, *Propaganda* points to the way beliefs can inform critiques as reinforcers of beliefs, whether they see themselves as hegemonic
or counterhegemonic. In this aspect *Propaganda* uses satire in order to point to Bakhtinian authoritarian discourse, discourse that must be either wholly accepted or rejected. The use of images in *Propaganda* as parallel illustration further illustrates this condition of totalizing beliefs that cannot put themselves within the frame of the camera.

The image of the woman in the film already turned up four years prior in Curtis’ *It Felt Like a Kiss*, as do other images in the propaganda film in other Curtis documentaries. Like Peleshian’s *Life*, we get a sense of a drama unfolding with the woman lying down. Though her face is not obscured as in *Life*, but rather present like a Hollywood close-up, we are still kept distant, since we cannot be sure whether the emotions portrayed are authentic or simulated for dramatic effect, or, in some sort of psychological netherworld, both. Is it documentation or fictional scenario? In fact, this very state of uncertainty concerning authenticity, especially authenticity of emotion (as opposed to historical or argumentative fact or transparency of origin) becomes the reason for its use in *It Felt Like a Kiss*.

Eisenstein’s comment concerning *KinoPravda*, that their films require an effort on the part of viewers to figure out what is going on in their films before intellectual engagement can happen, is hard to take as negative criticism. In light of a state of propaganda described above, forcing a viewer to develop an orientation to neither accept nor reject an authoritarian voice as Bakhtin has described such discourse, but focus on the music, images and words as familiar objects, we can see *It Felt Like a Kiss* moving towards an internally persuasive discourse via the vacuous self-contained netherworld of
a US pop-culture epic, a form Bakhtin would normally associate with out-right epic propaganda.

As with *Our Century* and *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, *It Felt Like a Kiss* shows us an accessible, though emotionally uneasy, way into playing with what we might think of as epic. The requirement on the part of the viewer to figure out what is going on is an emotional requirement as all three films feed the viewer with—perhaps tangentially—familiar elements. As with *Our Century*, this demand from the audience to form its emotional states in *It Felt Like a Kiss* has its roots in a social and national familiarity or connection to the film’s music, just as *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* plants its emotional states in an empathy for a novelistic subject.

In many of Peleshian’s films, music and sound are layered over a series of tracks, sometimes reaching up to 30 tracks at a time (“Going the Distance”). As much as overdubbing has created a certain possibility for enveloping a listener in sound, the inventor of what is now termed “the wall of sound,” Phil Spector, the maniacal pop music producer, opted out of layering instruments on tracks. Instead, he gathered musicians together in a crowded room and forced them to play for hours on end until they were too exhausted to let any of their individuality or virtuosity to dominate. We can see both Peleshian and Phil Spector working towards an emptying of individuality. Though perhaps both created their own walls of sound as a means towards ecstatic emotional submersion, the draining of individuality in Spector’s wall of sound allowed for emotionally self-absorbed US American teenagers of the 1960s to focus the pure
emotional drive of the wall of sound as if such a generalized drive were their own individual desires.

With this in mind, we can see a two-fold reason for Phil Spector’s placement in *It Felt Like a Kiss*. Though he is not mentioned in *It Felt Like a Kiss* as a main protagonist, Phil Spector, having one of his productions in the film’s title, perhaps is the biggest character in the movie—though like his musicians and Adam Curtis’ celebrities, anything resembling protagonistic individuality is absent except for short descriptive texts. In terms of something like “character development,” he is given the same treatment that he himself gave musicians regarding their individuality (Brown, 114). As an infamously, almost cartoonish egomaniac, he is stripped of his self-expression even as some of his songs in the film appear emotively coming from the heart.

This presence of emotive expression stripped of individualism becomes very prominent in two sequences in the film, where the staged sincerity in the emotive cinema vérité of documented performances of US Americans in psychotherapy sessions in the 1960s are made questionable through an ironic juxtaposition to images of suffering during the Vietnam War. Both use songs produced by Phil Spector to push the questioning of self-expression in its social context, emotionally convoluting habitual responses to familiar music. In order to hone in on these clips opening up meditative space through deliberate and restrictive juxtaposition, attention must be drawn to the larger morphing cast of featured and implied characters since they further focus the viewer towards questions of individual self-expression and the social control existing both in the creation and the use of that self-expression.
The people we are given as explicit and headlining characters in *It Felt Like a Kiss* are historical in origin, both as having existed with some social or political consequences in the past and as remaining recognizable fossilized relics of historical phenomena: Rock Hudson (closeted gay actor), Saddam Hussein (foreign agent of the CIA), Lee Harvey Oswald (possible domestic agent of the CIA), Doris Day (40 year-old virgin), Enos the Chimp (kidnapped African astronaut) and everyone above level 7 of the CIA (unseen madmen who commit errors and suicide) (see fig. 3.2-3.8).
In this aspect the film is like a New Historicist exercise of picking some things out of a dustbin and following meditative threads as to where they connect in an historic narrative much like *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*. Yet, unlike *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, the material similarity of references is more disjointed, lacking a set theme other than the theme of fragmented stories themselves. Stories about each character or phenomena idiosyncratically attached to such characters are told through a) a series of texts, which are vaguely true or vaguely lies \(^9\) and b) an accompanying song, usually either a lyrical ballad or Spector symphony meant to ironize the primary text.

One example of the abovementioned characters involves the use of Doris Day’s “What Does a Woman Do?” from 1959 over footage of Khrushchev and Nixon during the first televised color transmission, staged in Moscow in the film’s emblematic year of 1959. After being introduced to the content of their staged and subtitled text of diplomatic banter—discussing the relative advancements in each other’s technology—we are shown the footage again in terms of a woman’s resolve to stand by and be faithful to her husband/boyfriend/lover. What would normally be seen as a diplomatic encounter between two empires fundamentally at odds with each other turns into a story through song of two lovers, Khrushchev and Nixon, resolving to love no matter the difficulties external or internal to their relationship. This overused ironic use of music cannot be considered subversive or critical in the way Bakhtin envisions irony. In it is an easily

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\(^9\) The film makes certain claims whose factual truth is already bathed in romantic memory. Example: “In 1959 a 17 year old Lou Reed was given electro-convulsive therapy to cure him of his homosexual feelings. Reed said the ECT made him blank and devoid of all feeling and compassion for others. 3 years later Reed wrote a song that expressed this blankness.” Lou Reed was given ECT when he was 15 and “I’ll be your mirror” starts playing a song written 6 years later. It is a petty mistake or lie and doesn’t detract from but adds to it’s overall wash over of information. It keeps in line with the film’s thesis claim: “Every day Thousands of things happened to thousands of people. Some seemed to be significant and others did not.”
recognized form as irony, used repeatedly in political satire and therefore easily falling into habitual recognition.

Another example of a story ironized through pop music is the use of Dodie Stevens’ “Pink Shoe Laces” from 1959 played over the story of attempts by the CIA to assassinate Fidel Castro. As a young woman sings the materialistic praises for a wealthy sugar daddy in “tan shoes with pink shoe laces” and “a big panama with a purple high band,” the text tells us of another list of materials including exploding cigars and conch shells, poisoned shoes, LSD sprayed in a TV studio—all of which have failed to kill the Marxist leader, Castro. Though intricate in its use of matching up image, text and song to produce an irony concerning the mutual references of song and political history in separate social contexts of the same year, It Felt Like a Kiss—as with the Doris Day and Khrushchev passage—lets this irony fall into what Fredric Jameson has called “blank parody,” parody devoid of (originating) humor (1958).

Curtis uses pop songs in which people praise the objects of their desires as soundtracks over images of two political or cult leaders, mostly though not always leaders of nefarious natures. “Who’s that Guy?” sings about the movie star sex appeal of both Saddam Hussein and JFK. Roy Orbison’s “In Dreams” waxes sentimental about Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba and the cult dictator Joseph Mobutu as Enos the Chimp orbits the earth over the political events taking place in his homeland. “I Still Miss Someone” connects Osama Bin Laden to Charles Manson, not through their direct and obvious connection as marginalized cult leaders, but through their random link to the TV show Bonanza. Here the composite image of a “hero” is not just a matter of
fitting into unchanging formal categories of genus or species as in *Our Century*. Instead of emptying heroes of their individual or specific meaning to produce pure images, we see the historical narratives of these leaders reduced to images. In their reduction we see these narrative images serving as emotive reinforcing soundtracks of the pining song playing rather than the other way around.

As *It Felt Like a Kiss* progresses, we find hack uses of irony culminating in an overall theme of women singing the vacuous praises of men in positions of hegemonic political power. Femininity playing a secondary role of affirmation becomes a thing, an object that as it secures male domination becomes a sacred domestic or national object whose purity must be in turn itself protected. Experiencing such recontextualization of sentiment and message is not presented in singular isolations but through other accumulating visual layers that show it, not *in relation* to other tangential images, but *in obscurity* to them, *as if* such ironic juxtapositions are found *randomly rather than intentionally crafted* (see fig. 3.9).
As sequences mentioned above pass, these tangents concerning femininity take another turn into the song of the film’s title, where we encounter a deeper entrance into irony as a personal expression of meaning in opposition to a public or normative one. This is the first of two sequences mentioned which utilize songs produced by Phil Spector to question self-expression. The woman lying on a bed in the opening clip of Propaganda appears in Curtis’ film silent in the middle of an emotional break down as the lead singer of the Crystals sings unwaveringly and unemotive about how a boyfriend in question beats her because he loves her. We experience both song and image highlighting each other’s inauthenticity to trauma. The vocals appear mechanical and automated, the close-up of the woman on the bed overindulgent and self-absorbed. Over two verses, the yelling and wailing of the woman increases until she proclaims, “I want somebody.” We cut to a clip from a commercial with a woman in white elegantly
demanding to be zipped up. With a drive into Saigon during the Vietnam War we see Vietnamese soldiers standing guard and an American flag waving above a building until we come to the final verse of a song about battered wife syndrome with footage where, as the film explains, “a Buddhist monk burnt himself to death in protest against the corrupt American backed regime of General Diem” (see fig. 3.10). Another layer of irony concerning self-expression is added. Here, self-expression is framed as martyrdom, where the sacrifice of self, as opposed to self-absorbed indulgence, is not about absorbing brutality by siding with an oppressor, as in the song playing, but becomes a means of opposing oppression, though song and image both see such martyrdom through their own respective solemn meditative prayer. Juxtaposed again to this self-sacrifice is an image of a father playfully pretending to shoot his children, a game the children gleefully join in on (like the grave compliance of the battered girlfriend singing over it). The children pretend to die and hide behind trees till we come back to a commercial of a little girl dressed in white, “See Sally. See her dress. It is very white. Will it stay white?”
Fig. 3.10 still from Adam Curtis, *It Felt Like a Kiss* (UK, 2009)

Overall, the sequence pits first-world problems against third-world problems. The histrionics of the woman on the bed (in the middle of what appears to be a Wilhelm Reichian therapy session) and the father pretending to shoot his children for their own entertainment amount to the same superficial relation to suffering and death, where violence is staged or simulated and therefore repeatable like *Our Century* and *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*’s explosions and crucibles of terror. For the monk and victims of napalm such violence has direct consequences, something the US will experience itself as the narratives it tells itself and the world “begin to fall apart.” This, too, perhaps is a staged narrative trope of the US in the 1960s, which Curtis does not approach as he normally does, that is, as a journalist with a story to tell “telling you what to think.” If he is to support his thesis of waning power and fragmented stories, it must be done through an experience of the fragments themselves. We see this idea expressed effectively in the two
hyper-edited sequences in the middle and towards the end. The first world and third-world in these sequences are not pitted against each other in terms of weighted historical experience, but uniformly mixed in terms of decontextualized random image sensation.

The second sequence, using Spector’s “River Deep Mountain High,” brings us at its end to another clip of a psychotherapy patient going through the process of self-enactment we experience with the crying woman. This time, it is with the founder of Gestalt Theory, Fritz Perls, at the Eslen Institute in Big Sur, California. Instead of self-pity, we see a mild-mannered man directing words of malicious intent to others in the group session off camera (see fig. 3.11).

Fig. 3.11. still from Adam Curtis, It Felt Like a Kiss (UK, 2009)
Transcription of dialogue from scene:

Male Patient: “I can make you all cry. I can make you all feel terrible, maybe even forever. I can make the mouth and this mouth here do things and say things. I can almost destroy anyone, each one of you if I get out. There isn’t one of you I wouldn’t spare, not even you.”

Fritz Perls: “How do you feel now?”

Male Patient: “I feel very honest.”
Having already sensitized the viewer as to the complex layers of what emotional honesty might not necessarily mean but look like or appear to be (or perhaps have the sensation or “feeling” of), we are brought back into the world of irony. We may believe his words in so far as we may believe that this is what a lone gunman says to himself in a mirror. We may believe that he believes in the emotive truth of his words outside of any literal enactment of them. Yet, as a sound bite, we can only see the contradiction between violent message and therapeutic context.

In challenging habitual communication, Victor Shklovsky warns against the equation that art, as imagistic thinking, is an economy of mental effort towards meaning in so far as an image is “a fixed predicate of that which undergoes change.” (775). If art is imagistic thinking, it is to impart sensation as it is perceived and not known. To Shklovsky, it seems, images are, in a way, fixed entities. They hardly change from poet to poet or time to time: “poets are much more concerned with arranging images than creating them. Images are given to poets; the ability to remember them is far more important than the ability to create them.” Yet, as referents, images are not permanent and only externally resemble the stock imagery of fables or thinking in images. Though Shklovsky for the most part is discussing imagery as mental impressions via verbal language, the distinction made between images as ready-made forms and ready-made meanings becomes an even bigger issue of consideration in audio and visual recordings or records that often literally as referents never change over time while their arrangement and contextualization change perception. Even as appropriated video

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10 This appears in “Art as Technique” to concern the historical consequences of the conceptual rut of imagistic thinking as an economy of means towards meaning, especially in Symbolism. Yet, it also appears as a reconfiguring of thinking in images rather than a wholesale rejection of it.
images are sometimes altered, for example, solarized or tinted, or sound is slowed
down/sped up, etc., such changes in cited material as cited material in It Felt Like a Kiss
and dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y or even the more extreme photographic abstractions that appear
in Our Century are elements of mixing or arrangement and not changes that “create” new
images. What is capable of being fundamentally new is not meaning (in so far as
meaning is automatic and equational) but the perception of cited material and the possible
tangential meanings particular perceptions give us of material and historical narratives we
are often blindly and therefore meaninglessly or (in a paradox) unconsciously
overfamiliar with.

In It Felt Like a Kiss this perceived habitualization, rather than acting as a direct
conduit to meaning, blocks it. By working superficially through a 60 minute epic
concerning the Kennedy assassination, the spread of HIV, the space race, the toppling of
democratically elected governments by the CIA, a closeted gay actor, a maniacal music
producer, 9/11, super computers and so on, we are not given an alternative or secret
history or even newly discovered facts or analysis concerning such a litany of historical
events, but rather we are presented with new ways to engage emotionally with popular
material we can perhaps be publicly familiar with yet are separated from in our own
private relations to them.
I always like to work on leftovers, doing the leftover things. Things that were discarded, that everybody knew were no good, I always thought had a great potential to be funny. It was like recycling work. I always thought there was a lot of humor in leftovers. When I see an old Esther Williams movie and a hundred girls are jumping off their swings, I think of what the auditions must have been like and about all the takes where maybe one girl didn't have the nerve to jump when she was supposed to, and I think about her left over on the swing. So that take of the scene was a leftover on the editing-room floor—an out-take—and the girl was probably a leftover at that point—she was probably fired—so the whole scene is much funnier than the real scene where everything went right, and the girl who didn't jump is the star of the out-take.\footnote{Warhol, Andy. \textit{The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B (and back again)}. Harvest; New York, 1977. 44.}

Andy Warhol

B-Roll is an odd element in film and video. It is recognizable as an element, yet it has different meanings depending on its purpose. It can show in some, often tangential, way what a talking head is discussing or explaining in an interview. It can mask video glitches in said interview. It can be stock footage provided by entities for publicity. It can eliminate short unwanted content. It can divulge information. In a sense it is ornamental or illustrative and has no meaning of its own since it has no originating purpose of its own in the context of its use. If particular footage used as b-roll at some point did have an original purpose, this is habitually ignored in its use as a technique.
Even when it is used for purposes of association, this association is somewhere else in memory. It is a technique of memory and recognition.

It is not that often such secondary use is made up of leftovers or mistakes, and therefore disregarded in a final edit. In fact, much of the footage used in the three films discussed in this paper (or footage with the same form or content)—atom bomb explosions, documents of live news feed, old romantic comedies, etc.—has been used repeatedly as supportive material in documentary filmmaking elsewhere. The short film, Boys Beware, concerning homosexuals as sexual predators, used in It Felt Like a Kiss is also featured in Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman’s The Celluloid Closet. Atomic blast footage from the United States Federal Civil Defense Administration’s Operation Cue from 1955, used in dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y, is also used in Lucy Walker’s Countdown to Zero. As much as footage from the three films can be seen in other films where it serves as supportive or masking material, some clips have been used as the basis of turning what could be read as secondary use into primary use. Short clips of Rock Hudson movies are the primary basis for Mark Rappaport’s Rock Hudson’s Home Movies. Clips of atomic blasts become the focus of attention in The Archive Project Inc.’s Atomic Café. By their mere existence as overused footage, some events find their way into popular consciousness. A clip of an early failed multi-winged plane prototype, used in Our Century, is referenced in an episode of Family Guy.12

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12 In one of many attempts to become famous, Peter Griffin makes a flying machine to which Stewie, his precocious infant son, says, “You know, I vaguely recall seeing footage somewhere of something exactly like this, that, uh, leads me to believe that this probably won’t work.”
Perhaps Eisenstein was justified in his hesitation of editing film of short clips into “a neutral epic of statement of facts,” that the complete elimination of narrative coherency allows for a purely superficial relation to film. From the examples above we see a superficial relation of clips used ephemerally, not in their individual filmic or video use but in their repetition and socially accumulative effect as references and images.

In *Our Century*, we have seen how a conscious editing of a neutral epic of statements of facts can further enhance our understanding of how this works outside the film itself in Soviet national heroism and even in western media consumption. By focusing on superficial (or immediately present or recognizable) form and content similarities between clips, Artavazd Peleshian shows us how memory based on fleeting images can create a composite image. This composite image may act as a Bakhtinian epic, a self-contained transferal of a represented world into the past, absolute and fixed, but in this, *Our Century* is not a neutral epic, either in its dynamic movement or in its treatment of the magnitude of the sublime that can be found in often overfamiliar images. By placing his ephemeral images as starring roles rather than supportive material, we are not presented with blank or empty documents as Eisenstein must have seen *KinoPravda’s* work roughly at the beginning of the 20th century, but we as viewers towards the end of the same century, the same epic time, are presented with what science fiction writer, William Gibson, has called our “global, communal prosthetic memory.” (Gibson).

In *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, we see what effect this collective and external memory has on subjectivity in the heteroglot space of enacting media narratives, as opposed to consuming them, how it affects our sense of an “epic now of history.” While at the
beginning of the 20th century Mikhail Bakhtin saw novels historically as open eclectic reflections on contemporaneous social concerns, we find in Don DeLillo and Johan Grimonprez commentary on tendencies in fictional narratives of falling into private engagements with the self, of people cut off from history as they consume said history or engage with it from a secure place always under threat from the media narratives our isolated heroes absorb. What Bakhtin thought of in his definitions of the epic and the novel are seen in reverse in dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y, where the novel is of an absolute past (even if set in contemporary times), contained in itself; the news media as a collective oral tradition is infinitely open to the future as it works in epic rolling (repetitive) news cycles.

In It Felt Like a Kiss, we see how this collectively recognizable and repeatable use of material as b-roll can operate when it becomes the focal point of a film. In making his short, more experimental film, Adam Curtis uses footage and clips he uses elsewhere in his documentaries as decorative elements to present political and social histories. Rather than quick film shots working as supportive visual aids or eye-candy, textual narratives become enticing and often (perhaps deliberately) misleading or manipulative ways of reading images. This is perhaps an easily recognizable form of irony, but becomes complicated when such ironies are layered on top of each other. Whatever might be individualistic and personal, i.e., ironic, i.e., not an agreed connotation is only a small part of a wall of sound and images, gone and forgotten as soon as they appear. Rather than acting as a journalist telling his audience what to think (as he states he normally intends to do as a journalist), Curtis uses his hack suggestive imagery to allow
space to think about the consequences of emotional impact in his use of fleeting imagery and their pop music soundtrack.

As ephemeral elements can be used to disrupt habits of meaning as collage was used in the early avant-garde, we can see how this too became habitual and absorbed into conventional media practices. Such absorption does not diminish collage as a critical practice, but demands the attention of critical distance within the arrangement of familiar spectacles one attempts to find new meaning in by perceiving such spectacles anew.


*Atomic Café*. Dir. Jayne Loader, Kevin and Pierce Rafferty. USA, 1982. DVD.


*The Celluloid Closet*. Dir. Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman. France, UK, Germany, USA; 1996.


*Countdown to Zero*. Dir. Lucy Walker. Prod. Lawrence Bender Productions, Nuclear Disarmament Documentary, Participant Media. USA, 2011. DVD.


Grimonprez, Johan. *It’s a Poor Sort of Memory that Only Works Backwards*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011.

Haenggi, Christian. “‘The greatest work of art’: Karlheinz Stockhausen and 9/11” Interventions symposium at Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, 31 July 2011.


*Rock Hudson’s Home Movies*. Dir. Mark Rappaport. USA, 1992. DVD.

