1977: AUDIOVISUAL EXCAVATING AND REPETITION AS SUSPECT PAST IMPRESSIONS IN ESSAY FILMMAKING

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTORATE OF PHILOSOPHY

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[August 2019]
Submitted July 2019
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the writing of this dissertation, I would like to thank Kathy High, my dissertation Chair and my committee members, Tamar Gordon, Mary Anne Staniszewski and Robert Nideffer. I would also like to thank Thomas Mapfumo, David Agum, Derek Partridge and David Cushworth for their help in my research on media practices and nationalism in southern Africa in the 1970s and David Church for his assistance in researching the copyrighting of adult film in the late 1970s. I also would like to thank Michael Peters, Eric Brucker and Mick Bello for their assistance in the production of the three video works that form the basis of this dissertation.
ABSTRACT

The following dissertation is an inquiry into the use of pre-existing audiovisual media in essayistic filmmaking. I see the use if pre-existing materials as a means to address contradictions of cultural inheritance of reproducible media. This is done through an analysis of three single- and dual-screen installations of essay films in which I appropriate recordings from the year of my birth, 1977. I argue that a birth year can be understood as simultaneously personal and massively public. Audiovisual materials recorded during a birth year are globally distributed and widely received; they live on in public experience, before the birth subject’s conscious memory of such recordings and their depicted events. To claim mass-reproducible recordings from a time in one’s life of which one has no memory problematizes the concept of cultural inheritance and claims to prior and reconstructed meaning. Essay films often utilize recordings produced elsewhere and recontextualize them as narrative strategies for other purposes. This serves to destabilize any shared concept of inheritance.

I explore this through an analysis of three of my essay film works. First, I analyze my compilation video work of 80 films from 1977 in the cinematic Golden Age of Porn and retrospective views of it as a lost paradise one can desire to see in passively forgotten films. Second, I look at my single-channel work juxtaposing footage from the New York City blackout of 1977 with a contemporary science-fiction short story allegedly written by a Kremlin political advisor. I explore how the footage can serve as a suspect illustrative example of an allegory which appears to tell the personal story of a victim of a war, yet was possibly written by a perpetrator of information warfare, thus complicating how one reads political intention not only by the author, but by myself. Third, I present a dual-screen work exploring the simultaneous broadcast of the 1977 Oscars ceremony and a documentary on Rhodesia a month
and a day before I was born as if I were an adult capable of authoritative memories of the two broadcast worlds.
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation, 1977: Audiovisual Excavating and Repetition as Suspect Past Impressions in Essay Filmmaking, inquires into contradictions I both perceive and make as the audiovisual editor and creator of a series of essay films remixing footage that was broadcast or distributed in the year of my birth, 1977.

The essayistic and more specifically essay filmmaking has been broadly described as a genre of argumentation and storytelling which reworks existing forms of expression, realism, informational organization and opinion formation often through unstable public presentations of self which do not attempt to put forth explicit definable claims to truth. Specifically, I claim essay films have often concerned themselves with the circulation of discrete recorded material in the context of acceleration in the dislocation of people, information and production (including cultural production) which imaginatively discombobulates our notions of time and memory. However, as essay filmmaking has become a more familiar term to describe a mode within documentary, a mode which supposedly bust genres or merely complicate them, its relations to any assumed critical instability or dislocation can evolve or devolve into a codified methodology antithetical to older theoretical definitions of the essay film. In other words, what can be seen as a radical film practice, could become co-opted and diluted through commercialization of the form or through mere popularity and familiarity over time.

In this dissertation, I use the term “remix” to describe general recombinations of discrete recordings, circulations which essay filmmaking investigates. I do this to emphasize the ubiquity of circulating recordings including sampling as sound collage or appropriation as unlicensed use of material from specific copyright owners, official institutions, communities or social milieus.

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Remix is used here to generally describe the recursiveness in reproductive media through fluctuating publics which destabilizes cultural inheritance. In the context of reproduction and recombination, cultural inheritance as property or practices which are handed down can be a heritage or legacy desired in recordings of transient communication of a past perceived as lost or neglected, or endlessly recontextualized since a recording’s inception. Dramatic plots of historical inevitability and disjunctive durations of time often depend on artifacts from irretrievable pasts made immutable by such artifacts concrete recording, which can be quantitatively reproduced.

In this dissertation, I claim that cultural inheritance can be seen as continuously in flux, especially since the late 1970s with the simultaneous close of formal colonialism into nationstates and the simultaneous expansion of transnational free trade with its accompanying cultural globalization through electronic media. In this context, cultural inheritance, rather than grounding one to a delineable past, becomes destabilizing in the imaginative constructions (re)production and (re)combination in remix have created through over- and underfamiliar repetition. The ability to repeat recordings with or without perceivable difference may be experienced as a substitute for a retrievable past or one that promises to bring back a lost continuity, a continuity often perceived as an unmediated or at least a less mediated representation. I examine these concerns in my series of essay films, created by remixing footage that was broadcast or distributed in the year of my birth, 1977.

dual screen reimagining of the 1977 Oscars ceremony and a documentary on Rhodesia that were both broadcast at the same time a month and a day before I was born.

The following research questions address the complexities of media recycling which form a sense of dislodged experience of inheritance, political position and personal narrative in my films. My inquiry addresses these media as fragments of visual, sonic and narrative cultural artifacts culled from various US American and global or transnational mediascapes, which are by no means evenly representative of a national US identity nor of an evenly representative homogenous global or planetary pluralism.

How do essay films re-contextualize recordings and the over- and underfamiliar rearticulation of such recordings?

How is the essayistic a rigorously non-scientific research methodology in understanding my own recombinations of audiovisual recordings from 1977?

1.1 Articulating a Birth Year

A year can never be a distinct memory, nor even an amalgamation of memories over a year’s time. It is part of a unit of measurement that can be used not just to memetically track direct personal experience, but to attach oneself to larger often anonymous social worlds made possible by communal prosthetic memory aids including audiovisual recordings externally marked by systematizing information such as a date.
Since 1977, works by artists and scholars as similar and wide-ranging as pop singer, Taylor Swift’s *1989* (2014); rapper, Ana Tijoux’s *1977* (2010); and electronic musicians, Flying Lotus’s *1983* (2006) and Daft Punk’s *Random Access Memories* (2013) have all created sonic works based on their birth year or a time in which memories started to form. Many of these works of recent years self-consciously or deliberately centralize past media aesthetics, technology or artifacts of recorded sound production, especially from their year in question, as form and/or subject which even as recorded mediation can play the role of “raw material” which is then processed through mimicry (*Random Access Memories*), poetics (1977 and 1983) or presentism about the year in question (1989). Novelist, Salman Rushdie (*Midnight’s Children*, 1981), philosopher, Walter Benjamin (*Berlin Childhood circa 1900*, published posthumously in 1950) and presidential historian, HW Brands (*American Dreams: The United States Since 1945*, 2010) have all created texts which attempt to depict social worlds they were born into. Artists have created works about media or temporal mediation and experiences of the transnational from their childhood such as: DeeDee Halleck’s *Gringo in Mananaland* (1995), Alexander Kluge’s *Neue Geschichten, Hefte 1-18 Unheimlichkeit der Zeit* (1977), Naeem Mohaiemen’s *United Red Army* (2011), Johan Grimonprez’s *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1997), and Rainer Fassbinder’s *BRD Trilogy* (1979, 1981, 1982). What many of the works above particularly from after 1977 have in common is their often deliberate and self-conscious reliance on mass-reproducible media and mediated time-keeping in the construction of their content, sonic reference and appearance, or (as in the case of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Kluge’s *Unheimlichkeit der Zeit*) their dramatic plots.

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2 Starting in 1947, the year of Rushdie’s birth and India’s independence from Britain, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* both ends and was finished as a novel thirty years later in 1977 with the end of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency Rule in India. For HW Brands, born in 1953, his book, *American Dreams: The United States Since 1945* was conceived as a social history which could act as a surrogate for a memoir or personal story by writing about public historical events which could be seen as having an influence on Brands in generational terms.
Writing about oneself as experienced as an interior life (Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*), as a record of an extended world (Xuanzang’s *The Great Tang Dynasty Records of the Western Regions* travelogue), or a mix of the two (Sei Shonagon’s lists in her *Pillow Book*) has existed in many different pre-mass-reproducible-media contexts. However, print as arguably the first industrial commodity of reproduction has had a complex influence on the production of public self-representation. A notion of a modern subjectivity of individualism can be seen as the other interdependent side of mass-reproduction’s standardizing tendencies.³

Genres of the personal can offer up a variety of potentially politically resistive or inclusive, self-exploitable and vicariously participatory experiences, sometimes all at once. They offer sensational spectacles of the officially unofficial, critical interpretations of official history, and very open and public inventions and discourses of the marginal, the private, the deviant, the elite, or the nefarious as ubiquitously secret or invisible.⁴

As an adult, to centralize one’s birth or coming into this world often becomes an excuse for focusing on what is beyond one’s self rather than the other way around. Sometimes this is done to insert oneself in a metanarrative, grand history or tradition connected to a contemporary tension for self-representation which creates a demand for a perception of real or imagined disappearing pasts to recall. Even if highly embedded in their own time in the dislocating circulation of carefully constructed representations, recordings can nevertheless be treated retrospectively as a spontaneous, genuine, artless or unadorned raw material of a common sense reference in the moment of capture, a common sense that has since shifted, inverted or disappeared that gives us the excuse to centralize ourselves as excavator of lost common senses.

On the one hand, historical narratives can connect the present to any number of imagined pasts by constructing seamless causal dramatic plots of action. On the other, to enmesh oneself in a trajectory of mediated time involves emphasizing social and political disjunctures between a then and a now. Both naturalized dramatic plots and disjunctive extensions of time often depend on artifacts from irretrievable pasts made immutable by such artifacts’ concrete documentary traces. Such narrative plots and quoted extractions are not limited to individual biography, but can encompass often anonymous collective ones as well.  

1.2 Remixes

Appropriating footage can be described as taking footage already rhetorically formed elsewhere or elsewhen, especially without permission of a supposed author or copyright owner, and treating it and the speech therein (sonic and visual speech as well as verbal speech) as raw material to be reformed. By already rhetorically formed in terms of recording, I mean already edited into articulation rather than existing as footage shot specifically to be articulated later according to internally coherent intentions. In appropriation, footage is rearticulated outside of original intentions, even if perhaps such footage is initially created with a general knowledge or assumption that it can or will be rearticulated elsewhere.

The recycling and remixing of artifacts can be populist, rationally institutionalized, reactionary, politically conservative yet aesthetically radical (and vice versa). Such recycling is not necessarily meant as a Situationist detournement or subversion but can also seek to revitalize the petrified imagery of artifacts as sentimental nostalgia. It can be a means for social

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institutions both official and informal, large and small, to banally or routinely familiarize fluctuating publics with a continuous consensus flow of images as a narrative of coherent social identity. It is also noticeably a means of transforming artifacts into floating marketable commodities.

In various forms of remix, from political sound bites in news broadcasting to hip-hop sampling, appropriated recordings are recombined into repetitive and newly crafted meaning formations in many different analytical, nonsensical, as well as transparently and baroquely symbolic forms. As early as the Kuleshov effect, re-editing has been viewed by appropriation theoreticians and practitioners as critical experimentation in montage or pure editing, while Sergei Eisenstein negatively described the Council of Three’s rhythmic agitprop newsreels as completely plotless rather than critically examining plot-driven film. However, the political motivation of Eisenstein’s montage to work against nineteenth century developmental plots and naturalism, older literary developments that were already being applied to film within cinema’s first few decades, has since become altered as montage has become incorporated as a familiar applied technique in driving narrative plots within flows of attractions rather than disrupting them.

Repeatable situational appropriations can promise a cultural inheritance of shared or collective aesthetic or rhetorical experiences. Mass-reproducible media also dislocate and invent shared memories among strangers who will most likely never meet, thus complicating specific

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concrete attachment to inheritance via mass-media.\(^8\) While such experiences may appear to be homogenizing, that is, producing a forced, liberating or merely logistical cohesion, they are often destabilizing. Endeavors to reconfigure what has been iterated into another or even opposite meaning must confront those very oppositional endeavors’ dynamic co-dependency on the form, assumed meaning and material details of what is appropriated.\(^9\)

The appropriation of audiovisual materials from elsewhere or rather elsewhen can be said to exist within what globalization theorist, Arjun Appadurai, calls “mediascapes.”\(^{10}\) Mediascapes have increased in ubiquity, volume and intensity of imagery, figures of speech and circulation in the past forty years. According to Appadurai in 1996, mediascapes are the electronic production, distribution and circulation of information, often in real time, and the images of the world created by (traditional or legacy) media forms such as newspapers, television and film production which are constantly taken up by overlapping publics, counterpublics, individuals, urban neighborhoods, diasporic communities and institutions in different modes or frames of locality, temporality and global reach.\(^{11}\) These mediascape image-based narratives are appropriated or reconfigured into new narratives, often according to some perceived or imagined criteria from some imagined distant world.\(^{12}\) This creates a collapsing of shared and individual stories into new narratives, and in so doing, rather than homogenizing, creates disjunctures.\(^{13}\)

The condition of dislodged media can also create what Appadurai calls “nostalgia without memory,” or one’s attachment to any given number of pasts perceived within mediascapes.

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\(^11\) Ibid.

\(^12\) Ibid.

\(^13\) Ibid., 33.
Furthermore, according to Appadurai, such nostalgia is perceived as outside a shared culture’s assumed memory of an imminent self-contained referential experience. It appears as an appropriated nostalgia or a longing for another’s past often experienced through commodities of aesthetic experience such as Filipino renditions of older American pop songs, renditions existing under US military occupation. The circulation of images as commodities and removed reminiscence beyond any exclusive one-way Westernization or Americanization in the economic sphere of cultural globalization since the late 1970s has perhaps not resulted in a utopic pluralistic decolonization of culture. Nor exactly has it resulted in a notion that commodification’s Eurocentric roots have merely become less obvious but rather points to shifts in networks of media flows, media flows which have complicated our assumptions about political criticality concerning cultural inheritance and appropriation in media.

Since the late 1970s, the proliferation of cheap, portable and decentralized production, archival, distribution and circulation technologies have changed the dynamics of media appropriation, including the experience of disembodied culture, who produces it and for whom beyond postwar nationstates invested in more nationalized and centralized audiovisual cultures such as broadcasting and cinema. Media piracy theorist, Ravi Sundaram, has even suggested that such proliferation and access to media technologies has made informality and piracy a new centralized norm or practice of not just traditional shadow economies like arms dealers, Global South bootleggers of Holly- and Bollywood films and other large-scale yet marginal trade networks but can now be seen in social media, peer-to-peer file sharing, mobile texting, online shopping and WikiLeaks. Rachel O’Dwyer claims that such conditions have made media

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14 Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 30.
appropriation by networked masses at large crucial to the global profit-driven economy of corporations who can integrate networked decentralization into their economic control.¹⁶

Nostalgia without memory may be a way of focusing on the complexity of utopic as well as contentious multiculturalism within the context of global commodity exchange and control, but it can also guide us towards how what one assumes to be one’s own simplistically delineated cultural property and practices can be further naively segregated and distanced as anachronistic, as already dead only to be denied death by the questionable license of recuperating a perceived loss. Nostalgia without memory can also be experienced in the perception of a disparity of purpose in the incorporation of footage from another source for another purpose in mind to create a counter argument. It can be experienced in the automation and habitualization Viktor Shklovsky criticized in the production of meaning through symbols which become better known than the complexities they are meant to represent, apparently morphing (re)presentations into substitutions.¹⁷

A birth year can conjure up the impression of personal primordialism before the development of our acquired languages, cultivated categorical thinking, familial or social identity, or adopted habits. However, this personal prehistorical impression can be seen as an outcome of such acquired cultivations made possible by social worlds which engage in their own incongruent nostalgias without memory. Recordings from one’s birth year can ambivalently alert us to this complexity when we assign them the role of being anachronistic raw material (even in articulations which are (over)familiar to us) to be discovered anew. We can treat recordings as evidence of lost idiosyncrasies, especially within reproductive technologies which

service idiosyncrasies as content while contents seek to avail themselves of mediation or delivery systems of reproductive technologies often perceived as lacking anything idiosyncratic themselves.

1.3 The Essay Film

The essay, in written, photographic and filmic form, is often described as existing outside genre, i.e., outside recognizable formulations or methods.\textsuperscript{18} It has been described as working against genre into an anti-genre, cannibalizing other primary genres to become a supra-genre, or it is a cross-disciplinary mode resulting in an inter- or multi-genre.\textsuperscript{19} Essays can be described as a mix of argument and storytelling, a mix which seems to confound genres and their assumed hierarchies. The essay is a mode of writing that is undertheorized considering its ubiquity in formal public pedagogy in the production of civic discourse in twentieth-century liberal democracies, in its contemporary popular and populist form in think-pieces on social media in the past ten or so years, and in official editorial writing in journalism. Yet, the essay’s contextual and hybrid malleability and adaptability show how dependent the essay is on experimentation and theoretical notions of methodology rather than a reliable and consistent set of practices (despite the formulaic five paragraph essay or “What I did on my Summer Vacation”).

In these conditions, the essayistic has become seen as a non-methodical method which encompasses fiction, non-fiction, philosophical diatribes, journalistic reportings, confessions of


the heart, childhood memories, and so forth. Aldous Huxley described the essay as a “literary species” whose wide variety can be examined through three gravitational pulls: the personal, the factual or concretely particular, and abstract universals. Essays are often valorized as continuously undoing their own arguments. In the essay, one is forced to confront (often professionalized) knowledge as (unprofessionalizable) opinion; one becomes “a professional in a dilettantish genre.” It does this by presenting an “I” which does not project an obvious or transparent subject as in autobiography but rather undoes itself often using oneself as an excuse to talk about a world and vice versa.

The essay as a subjective idiosyncratic non-methodological method of argument and storytelling concerning a self, given particulars and philosophical abstractions is often seen as squarely coming out of the industrialization of communications in print culture and the subsequent commodification of information. However, the earlier essays or “attempts” of Michel Montaigne (1533-1592) (the acknowledged inventor of the essay and coiner of the term) were neither story nor argument but, like many forms of electronic media recombinations, sets and lists of extracted quotes from other sources. In contradiction to the conception of the essay’s position as a pedagogical tool for structured, logical thinking, especially for children, Montaigne can be seen as having invented for himself his approach to writing as an antidote to what he saw as an overly rigorous externalizing and objectivizing logic in writing.

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22 Epstein, After the Future, 15.
23 Ibid., 226.
25 Epstein, After the Future, 231 and Michel De Montaigne, “On sadness,” “On idleness,” “On prognostications,” “That the taste of good and evil things depends in large part on the opinion we have of them,” “To philosophize is to learn how to die,” “That it is madness to judge the true and the false,” and “On affectionate relationships,” in The Collected Essays, trans. and ed. MA Screech (New York: Penguin, 1991).
26 Ibid., and Eisenstein, The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe, 57.
The essayistic can be said to work through prior or opening suppositions, confessions of pathology or prejudice to reach a challenging core of honesty about what one really knows or thinks.\textsuperscript{27} Here, unique subjectivity can be seen as self-interrogation not a mere display of self within public experience. In this, the essay can force an audience to resist engaging in rejoinders particularly in regards to shared or assumed ideological agreement. Instead, the essayistic offers up a presentation of its own incorporated self-criticism which can create political instabilities of intention.\textsuperscript{28} The essay can be a way of self-negating through public experience of events, actions and objects outside any assumed authority of one’s own assumed idiosyncratic expressions.\textsuperscript{29} The essayistic experiments with experiences of reality as a public elsewhere creating a dialogue “between the intimate other of self and the public Other.”\textsuperscript{30} In all this lies the self-reflexive quality of the essayistic.

Essay films can be said to work in the public elsewhere of mediascapes replacing the voice of a narrator with that of a commentator within an increasing public experience of reproductive visual depictions.\textsuperscript{31} Public appearances often cut across given social, economic and cultural divides as well as create such divides in dispersed shared experience of public appearances which can interlace the intimate with public anonymity.

Another aspect to the essay in film is that it comes out of various documentary film practices of storytelling. While Hans Richter in coining the term “essay film” was interested in describing a form of filmmaking which was looser than documentary and could pull from infinitely more expressive means, the documentary itself could be said to pull away from

\textsuperscript{27} Phillip Lopate, “In Search of the Centaur: the Essay Film,” in Essays on the Essay Film, 110.
\textsuperscript{28} Nora Alter, “The Political Im/perceptible in the Essay Film: Farocki’s Images of the World and the Inscription of War,” in Essays on the Essay Film, 139.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 35 and 55.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 57.
expectations of objectivity, being “more art than news.” While many instances of film or video works, as single channel works, installations, broadcast productions, or theatrical exhibitions can be labeled categorically as “essay films,” it is perhaps more helpful to see films as having essayistic tendencies or qualities. Instances of mixing fact and fiction indicative of the essayistic can most readily be seen in mockumentary films, and the political documentaries of Michael Moore who is certainly present as a personal subject within larger public elsewheres. However, it is the open dialogic self-negating through public experience which makes certain audiovisual works essayistic.

Alexandre Astruc in 1948 made a prediction that the camera will replace the pen in so far as the framing of storytelling in the dramatic staging in film studios will close as publics in the streets and in their private abodes will take over as recording technologies become more portable and widely available. People will not be confined to a strict division between staged illustration of a story or faithful representation of reality. However, the question of open argumentation in public experience, even in the form of confession, can be said to have expanded dramatically, especially as people participate in public presentations of self.

In addition, while one could have a history of essay films, a history which is supposed to squarely evolve out of an older European print culture and later postwar anticolonial Leftist film practices, this can often come into contradiction with global postcolonial histories by essay films from filmmakers in the Cold War-era First, Second, and Third Worlds and in the post-Cold War Global North and Global South. Essay films can be seen as continuously seeking to undermine Europe-first notions of history, notions of history where Europe is not only assumed to be the

future of modernization or the center of theorizing about history but even the inventor of anti-colonial struggle.\textsuperscript{34}

Essay films have perhaps always concerned themselves with issues of appropriating, collecting and circulating public images of ethnicity, consumerism, military technology and the hubris it brings, or urban mobility with the intention of critically and ironically reflecting on the planetary power relations this circulation assumes and depends on. Yet, according to some theorists on the essay, rather than being a marginal or autonomous critical practice as defined by Theodor Adorno in the postwar twentieth century, the film version of the essay is increasingly becoming a reflection of (media) commodity production, i.e., the multi-variant production of raw materials out of already rhetorically-produced ideas, images, sounds, speech or text (embedded in electronic media).\textsuperscript{35}

1.4 Chapters on Individual Works

I investigate the above research questions by looking at how my own reconstructions of audiovisual and textual media have given rise to an uncanny historical personhood which has been shaped by mediascapes of the imaginatively global, an historical personhood which simultaneously attaches itself to concrete artifactual images recorded in 1977 and narrative imaginings often tied to assumed nebulous and unstable criteria. This personhood sees mass-produced media as encompassing multiple overlapping references outside of direct personal experience which encompass multiple dubiously enforced exoticizings of both the self and other


through audiovisual mediascapes. The paradox of nostalgia without memory makes possible a productive doubt or open skepticism concerning my ability to construct narratives utilizing supposedly verifiable or concrete images, sounds and words from a temporal marker of 1977.

In the first half of this dissertation, I focus on 1977 as part of a Western temporal mapping which can be defined as continuous as the West undergoes contradictory iterations as it gets reinvented by varying cultural practices. I also focus on how both the essay film and certain strains of remix have attempted to address the global circulations of audiovisual fragments by defamiliarizing recombinatory experiences of audiovisual media, defamiliarizing techniques which have become more and more familiar.

In my video works, doubt can also be seen as stemming from my lack of direct experience or rather personal conscious memory of 1977. This apprehension or confusion is also a result of an everyday, habitual emersion in the experience of disembodied, prosthetic and fractured collective memory supposedly lodged within media artifacts.

While myth and tradition are often seen as relics from premodern cultures, since the 1960s many theorists of modernity and industrial modernization see tradition as either invented by modernity and nationalism or emerging with modern life as the distinctive by-product of anxiety concerning vanishing pasts. The notion of progressive newness and antimodern declarations of recovery of a supposedly lost yet stable past can be more accurately seen as co-dependent towards the end of the twentieth century. The nostalgia for what has been lost is undermined by the fact that older narratives reach us as older narratives often by continuously being migrated to and reiterated by newer media forms of reproducibility.


In the chapter on *Inbetween Wonderland 1977*, I investigate contentions surrounding adult films from the Golden Age of Porn as an inheritance. In the late 1980s, the almost instantaneous declaration of a Golden Age of adult film from ten years prior point to experiences of immediate disappearance via new media forms. A Golden Age of Porn would never have existed if it were not for its afterlife, being packaged and viewed as an older Golden Age in the domesticated at-home video format. I look at how my own structural organization of eighty pornographic films depends on audiovisual formats which continuously kill off earlier formats in order to preserve them, creating the narrative frame of a rise and fall of a Golden Age.

Cultural remix and essay filmmaking have both reflected changes to subject, producer, and audience and sought to confound and complicate expectations of them. In their use of circulating media materials and cultural constructs, essay films like the more delineated mockumentary genre often, though not always, seek to make apparent that the narratives they supply concerning the media they utilize are to be viewed with a healthy amount of knowing suspicion. Audiences are asked to doubt the factual validity or accuracy, critical analysis, as well as the contextual or situational authority of what they experience. In other words, essay films often intend to open up the audience to a shared self-doubt concerning coded cultural mediations and circulations, often as such circulations change over time.

However, as such rhetorical and aesthetic meta-commentary becomes more ubiquitous and integrated into the forms of official discourse, the more such commentary can appear as “blank parody,” i.e., without seeming to have an authentic motive of telling truth to power behind the inauthenticity of the parody; it appears as cadaverous speech.\(^{38}\) It can become impossible to tell whether something is a form of “sincere support, subtle ridicule or a peculiar

mixture of the two.”39 This parody can be blank if political conditions make explicit opposition
“inefficient, counterproductive, or impossible.”40 Furthermore, it can be impossible to tell if
something is co-opted or independent, institutional or grassroots when officialdom invades or
utilizes informality. The appropriation and reconfiguration of media artifacts and rhetoric can
appear as reflective of normative culture or dominant discourse which has integrated into itself
aesthetic forms like disjunctive montage and rhetoric like irony and knowing suspicion.

In the chapter on Without Sky: The Tale of the Grey Cardinal, I look at how critiques of
Western narratives introduced in the late 1970s and often specifically written and formulated in
1977, appear to have been applied as political media strategy by Vladislav Surkov, a former
theater artist and current political strategist of Russian president, Vladimir Putin. This is viewed
specifically through my video interpretation of an allegorical science fiction short story, which
references multiple novels and was allegedly penned by Surkov in Russian Pioneer, a literary
publication with loose ties to the Kremlin.41 Made in 2015 before stories began to circulate
about the Russian utilization of social media networks to sway the US presidential election in
2016, my video appears to be a very deliberate matching of words to images from 1977 but was
actually a matter of happenstance. In this chapter I aim to see how complex media literacy,
intent and irony can be to interpret within remix practices which dubiously lack discernible
centers and peripheries of informal production making deliberation and the distinction between
telling truth to power or power to truth hard to discern.

39 Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak, “American Stiob: Or, What Late-Socialist Aesthetics of Parody Reveal about
40 Ibid., 213.
41 Russian Pioneer’s editor, Andrei Kolesnikov, is one of the editors of Vladimir Putin’s autobiography, Vladimir
Putin, First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, ed. Nataliya
Gevorkyan, Natalya Timakova, and Andrei Kolesnikov, trans. Catherine A. Fitzpatrick (New York: Public Affairs,
2000).
Both remix and essay filmmaking in a global context point not only to the complexities of the assumptions of cultural inheritance and political convictions, but to the complexities of personal expression and narrative as well. The personal is complicated since so much of one’s life involves what takes place elsewhere or encompasses a displaced media experience of others’ pasts. If claims to inheritance and criticality can be doubted, personal narrative can be doubted as well. Can one tell a personal narrative when the telling of a personal tale is dependent on varying social expectations and narrative conventions of the personal and furthermore exists within the context of local media reception dislodged from local media production for ubiquitous and semi-isolated public consumption? Can one tell a personal tale about that which does not directly concern oneself, especially when what affects one’s life happens away from oneself or before consciousness begins but yet can appear in audiovisual appearances which have been spatially and temporally displaced as mediated time?

In this context, does a personal narrative become nostalgia without memory? Does it become a loss of a past that was never really specifically our own to lose in the first place, even if this seemingly displaced and “inauthentic” media experience of a disjunctive past occupies a great portion of an everyday experience of flows of images, words and sounds from varying interests?42 In March 28, 1977, I investigate how two evening programs, the Oscars ceremony and a documentary on Rhodesia, both broadcast in the United States one month and one day before I was born, compete for immediate audiences that night from the perspective of my future present-day, middle-aged self whose life trajectory was perhaps conditioned by nebulous impersonal forces in 1977 that were unknowable at a moment before even being born.


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42 Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 30.
incorporation into or cross-pollination with institutional practices, especially in terms of recombining past discrete images, sounds and words into new narrative forms.

1.5 My Contribution

I aim to show how past media content, especially concrete images, words and sounds as mediated cultural inheritance can rhetorically be turned into something other than what such media was when it was transiently communicated in 1977 under different conditions. I contribute to my field of recombinatory filmmaking by showing that not only can such discrete images, words and sounds be reformulated but that one’s hindsight perspective on past images should never be taken as a final logical or justifiable argument, should never forget the assumed teleological goal or inevitability which often unconsciously underlies such assumptions. Nor should such a perspective be taken as a totalizing symbolic meaning formation that connects to and restores meanings from any given selective set of pasts.

Furthermore, I contribute to my field by showing how essay films can continuously work against totalizing images of the past through showing past media as partial perspectives we often desire to make whole again. No matter how formulated a definition of the essayistic is (as a pedagogical tool for teaching structured thinking to children, as a European textual genre with postcolonial visions of globality, as an anti-autobiographical form of personal writing, etc.), its apparent refusal to utilize a specialized method of inquiry with definable skills and knowledge makes it a form of writing that continuously adds to generalizable knowledge by refusing to declare itself as anything but an “attempt,” an opinion hashed out of other opinions, opinions
which are often lodged in the dumb factual existence of recordings of time, which can be framed as having no memories of their own.

The essay can never take itself to be a rigorously repeatable methodology that is supposed to paradoxically produce innovative outcomes. It refuses to professionalize itself into authority but rather relies on a self-aware uninformed perspective which paradoxically must remain general and aggregate if it is to become generalizable knowledge at all. However, this unprofessionalizable, organic intellectual, experimental, civic-minded and populist literary and filmic form must confront new realities in the exploitation of recombinatory media practices in continuously mutating forms of rationalized and commodified informality.

I contribute to the essay film by working with this paradox of remix within the essayistic by focusing on the informational details of what appears in audiovisual materials as suspect past impressions. By doing so, I can perhaps not take such details and my situational authority for granted in how I develop stories about them or with them. This is especially true as those fixed details as recorded time can become simultaneously overfamiliarized and transformed through seemingly endless recycling which always promises to bring us something new through reproducible methods and more often than not fails.
2 DISCOURSE REVIEW

In this section I will be laying out the theoretical background to my essay films. First, I will look at the way the marker of 1977 is bound to a calendrical system that is at once seemingly neutral and tied to a form of chronological control of the so-called West. Second, I look at how the recycling and circulating of audiovisual media confounds notions of this temporal control. Third, I investigate how the essay film relates to the proliferation and circulation of images.

2.1 1977: In Western Chronologies and as Mediated Presence of Time

The desire to contextualize and re-contextualize recordings from the late 1970s can be said to be dependent on systems of temporally organizing information which, at least partially, revolve around a calendar. As a year, 1977 can be approached as one year among many which can appear as detached. It is merely a marker in a system of measurement which requires chronologies or narratives of time to do the work of contextualization. A year can trigger imagined chronologies. However, 1977 itself comes out of an historically loaded development of temporal and spatial mapping that is anything but detached. To understand how essay films recontextualize over- and underfamiliar recordings requires serious consideration about temporal mapping, especially as such mapping runs parallel to and is a product of continual contradictory expedient reinventions and retrospective re-contextualizations of the West, a relative spatial orientation and overlapping geopolitical narratives which essay films continuously investigate.
2.1.1 Calendar Systems and Trajectorisms of the “West”

One can see chronological date stamping as one possible contribution to disembodied artifacts being taken for granted by me as memory. The chronological dating of 1977 is a static, non-dynamic marking arising out of the temporal media of a specific calendrical system, which has become so ubiquitous as to be unconscious. Due to their antiquity and deep influence on many subsequent regulating temporal practices, calendars as media of time are barely perceivable as cultivations for mediating memory. Temporal media such as calendars develop as a second nature, that is to say, culture or shared habituated practices. They are experienced as natural through reliable repetition and familiarization. Calendars also aid in chronologies which can dubiously make events, practices and aesthetics appear as emerging, residual or ossified, depending on assumed trajectories of events. In this sense date stamping is anything but neutral in so far as it allows for or coerces chronology upon temporal thinking. This problematic of time is very much tied to what can be loosely referred to as the invention of the West, a spatial signifier fraught with political or polemical tensions. It is a temporalization that is praised for having a notion of progress or improvement embedded in it. It is vilified as a hypocritical cover of ostensibly neutral mapping and record keeping of time for imperial and colonial endeavors, especially (but not exclusively) by Europe which wipes out or subsumes all other systems of time-keeping.

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1977 is a year embedded within “Western” temporalities, especially a Gregorian calendar, which marks off time regardless of what falls under it. The temporal referential mapping of the Gregorian calendar may be regulated by solar and lunar cycles, but it can in turn regulate much related to audiovisual and textual media, including the production of linear, causal, sequential and chronological plots of human history as changing events separate and detached from a cyclical cosmos assumed to be unchanging. It is part of a temporal system which is technically neutral but has been used as a form of dominance or control in practice, through often contradictory or competing trajectories. It regulates copyright. It manages election cycles, fiscal cycles, civic holidays and some religious ones. It is the basis for many official ceremonies such as the Oscars, Eurovision, the National Congress of the Communist Party of China and the Olympics. Yet ironically, it is also the means by which we can contest such dominance or control by creating parallel narratives along this controlling mapping of time. It can be the means by which we celebrate our own birth, personalizing our own existence into multiple impersonal and overlaid temporal systems.

This Western calendar can be framed or understood as a bureaucratic temporality which allows for the objectified chronological location of persons, places, things, events, ideas, memories, sentiments, political alliances and grievances. It attempts to locate within a chronological order everything secular, religious, agricultural, urban, local, cosmopolitan, vacuous, subversive, apologetic, diverting, ephemeral, or seemingly enduring. Appadurai sees this as a “trajectorism,” which assumes and creates “an episteme about time’s arrow and has to do with sequence, cause, duration, and chronology—the normal hallmarks of our current

49 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 123.
scientific assumptions about temporality."\(^{50}\) This trajectorism is a “narrative trap of the West,” whose success relies on industrial production and world conquest.\(^{51}\) It must be able to map both time and space to produce causal, progressive, evolutionary narratives. In some sense one can see Western trajectorism as not just a matter of imperial arrogance but a tool for measuring the success of staging Europe’s own contradictions (individual vs. society, church vs. state, etc.).\(^{52}\) Paradoxically, as I will argue, it also must be able to constantly destroy and relocate itself as well as have simultaneous geographical locations and contradictory framings of culture in order to achieve this progress. This continual relocation and the assumptions about location, as I will argue later in this discourse review, has been consistently taken up by essay films in grappling with the migration of audiovisual recordings from one place to another or in handling the placelessness of recordings through continuous circulation and flow.

2.1.2 Shifting Geographies of the West

Like Appadurai, Stuart Hall sees the narrative trap of the West as an historical trap.\(^{53}\) It is something that has developed in time as it relates to both abstract space and place defining as well as it relates to constructs that are political, religious, racial or ethnic, economic, and environmental. In Dipesh Chakrabarty’s critical analysis of European framings of history, due to world conquest, Europe (as one prominent iteration of the West) appears as theoretically knowable, while the rest of the world is a site for empirical data which “fleshes out a theoretical

\(^{50}\) Appadurai, “The Spirit of Weber,” in *The Future as Cultural Fact*, 224.
\(^{51}\) Ibid.
\(^{52}\) Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact*, 227.
skeleton.” For Chakrabarty, European theories of culture, society and history, are ironically “eminently useful in understanding our [non-Western] societies.” For Chakrabarty, this is not to celebrate the mimetic or purportedly derivative in non-Western appropriations of European thought but to acknowledge its unavoidable and even non-consensual influence and impact.

Not only can European theoretical skeletons be paradoxically useful in their unavoidable coercion, they can be inverted to see all kinds of ironies within models of history. James Snead sees ironies and contradictions in meta-narratives of the West by inverting Europe’s position in Hegel’s teleological notion of history. Snead sees that so-called “oriental” cyclical views of history were widespread in Europe before notions of causal emplotment, as well as industrial and fiscal cycles in capitalism, imposed newer notions of unilinear progress on Europe and took over European culture’s own conception of itself. In his analysis of Hegel’s claim that Africa has no history, rather than merely point out Hegel’s explicit racism, Snead makes use of Hegel’s own model of teleological history against Hegel’s specific claims:

Hegel was almost entirely correct in his reading of black culture, but what he could not have guessed was that in his very criticism of it, he had almost perfectly described the ‘there’ to which European culture was ‘headed.’ Like all models that insist on discrete otherness, Hegel’s definition implicitly constituted elements of black culture that have only in this century become manifest.

Stuart Hall claims that one can see the West as an historical construct. It exists in the Renaissance, but also as a means to imprint in the imagination transient political moments, e.g., the dual victories of the United States and the Soviet Union resulting in the Cold War between yet another version in an ongoing series of Easts and Wests. It is associated rightly or wrongly

54 Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 29.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 148.
with ancient Greek democracy as its philosophical origin and Roman law as its legal foundation. It has been linked with Christendom, Judeo-Christianity and at times, a Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition. It has been associated with administrative reason or rationality, i.e., logocentrism and the universality of Enlightened humanism and cosmopolitanism, however hypocritical or contradictory such humanism might be. In terms of global colonial migration it has been associated with European settler nations and white ethnicity, European colonialism itself, the Western Hemisphere (but not Latin America), and the so-called “First World”. Of course it has most often been associated with Europe, but somehow not the ambiguously demarcated eastern half which must include its various “sick men of Europe” (of the east) starting with the Ottoman Empire and including the Hapsburg Empire, Poland, Yugoslavia and most ironically and most recently since the 2008 financial crisis, with the “origin” of Western Civilization itself, Greece. During and since the Cold War, the West has been embodied in NATO (including Turkey and in opposition to eastern Europe). It can also be said of the West that it has changed its geographical moniker to become the “Global North” (in contradistinction to the Global South) after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Notions of the scientific revolution as emanating from within Europe as an imperial center of Enlightenment may be seen as having been deterritorialized away from former Western center-periphery models of production since the late 1970s in audiovisual media. It shows up in the notion of westernization as a process of becoming. This can be seen in the advent of the video cassette, a consumer product developed out of the competing and collaborative corporate and national economic interests of Japan and the United States both during and after WWII. As the cassette became manufactured in Asia, it did not necessitate circulating into any

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recognized western sphere of influence, creating global and transnational video cultures whose technology, commodification, and transplanted indigenous practices did not necessitate the postwar transatlantic version of the West. While Chakrabarty points to the problems of sites of theoretical knowledge which still continue, we can also see how the West as an ongoing geographic expansion is also a matter of shifting sites of domination for retrospective inventions, political expediency, technological ubiquity and economic trade.

Of course, the West has always been associated with the concept of “modernity.” Furthermore, as we can see, it can be understood as a cultural entity that has defined itself by its incorporated “Others.” While it can be associated with Matthew Arnold’s 19th century notion of culture being what is most high and noble about Europe, the West had also in the 20th century become associated with a lack of culture for the very reason that it is “cultural” and “modern,” and not local or indigenous; or it lacks culture because it is experienced via Americanization and mass media.

Directions towards new sites of the West are also implied in recent histories of neoliberal free trade. Though globalization is a term that has only been in prominent use since the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, in the past fifteen years, many economic and cultural historians critical, apologetic or supportive of neoliberalism, mark the 1970s (sometimes, specifically the late 1970s) as the time period in which transnational free trade beyond nationally-bound or planned economies of socialism (as in mainland China) and managed capitalism (as in the United

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62 Sundaram, “Postcolonial Media After the Informal.”
States) starts to spread, shifting older geopolitical dynamics. In Naomi Klein’s critical history of neoliberalism, directions towards new trajectories of the West can be seen as the result of the shifting sites for experimenting with economic models for deregulation and privatization for multinational corporations. A shift appears, from a western Europe- or United States-first model of “progressive modernization” for newly independent states to emulate to one, since the 1970s, of testing out free market capitalism in so-called “non-Western” regions. For Klein, this shift starts with Pinochet’s Chile, then expands to Peru, post-apartheid South Africa, “shock therapy” in post-Soviet Russia and oil rich Nigeria among others. It also takes shape in the “Asian miracle” both before and continuing on through the International Monetary Fund crisis of

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\[\text{\text{67} Klein, The Shock Doctrine, 11.}
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the late 1990s, a crisis to be repeated globally in 2008 as similar financial practices of credit and
debt also grew in the so-called “West” or “Global North.”

2.1.3 Recordings as Temporally Displaced

Collecting recordings from 1977 can be a way of synchronically cutting through
continuously reinvented diachronic trajectories, yet recontextualizing recordings from a given
year can depend on historical narratives. In collecting, primary and secondary roles can switch,
not between social forces utilizing given forms of communication, but between events of social
forces and documentation.68 Audiovisual recording documenting in light and soundwaves can
contribute to the experience of “homogeneous empty time” to be filled up with the stuff of events
becoming an unfulfillable continuum, one that just goes on and on beyond the actively imagined
and hoped for trajectories of actions.69 Recontextualizing recordings can be seen as a way of
displacing recordings out of original intentions.

Extratextual events can habitually or unthinkingly be assumed to be embedded within
audiovisual recordings captured at a moment in time and retrieved in a given present. A
mundane or commonplace experience of audiovisual recordings can take on the role of a matter-
of-fact reality of 1977. A year is not a media experience until one (perhaps shortsightedly)
proclaims to separate and distance this year from a given present in order to claim these
recordings produced then as fragments of one’s own past, to presuppose death and likewise deny
this loss.70 One can claim these artifacts to one’s present as a license and entitlement of

68 Press Conference after the station takeover before the assassination in Videograms of a Revolution, (1992;
Chicago, IL: Facets Multimedia, 2008), DVD.
69 Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities, 24.
70 Michel De Certeau, The Writing of History, 5.
recuperating this past that is ultimately beyond oneself in socially temporal and spatial
displacements. This questionable license then can be seen not as knowledge of history based on
verifiable evidence per se but as an assumed emotional authority of cultural inheritance or
assumed collective memory. This is true even if this license dubiously involves excavating
artifacts that, even though they come from a demarcated “primordial birth year,” are nevertheless
impersonal and detached in their past audiovisual recording. That is, they are not entirely one’s
own but must forever be from not only another time but multiple ultimately unknowable pasts
often converging and diverging from one another. Audio and visual recordings seem to present
these dynamic flows as fixed synchronic time which can compel us to jump to an impression of
them as part of an immutable past that can obliviously or self-consciously be perpetually
resituated in narratives of recuperation or even invention as recuperation.

Culture can be defined as the human-made habitualization of practice which becomes a
shared second nature. In industrialization, mechanized habitualization must confront the way
industrialization constantly shifts social habits through changing forms of production and
consumption. These changes can most readily be understood in economist, Joseph Schumpeter’s
concept of “creative destruction,” or the constant change and turnover of not just products but
whole processes of production and consumption which enable capitalism to maintain its vitality
for producing profit. Economic and business cycles depend on repetitions of decline within an
illusion of overall continuous growth. As mass-reproducible media production and
consumption processes continuously change to maintain vitalizing and accumulating profits,
narrative forms can adapt, appearing either as residual or assumed evolutionary inevitabilities or

trajectories of media infrastructures.\textsuperscript{74} Often it is only by cultural practices becoming dead, or rather less obvious and therefore becoming part of a merely given landscape, do we see them as secondary or learned natures including the production of memory aids seen in cultural waste.

For Walter Benjamin, while information perhaps does not need to survive past the moment in which it is new, a story must never exhaust itself. Instead a story concentrates its strength, releasing it after a long time.\textsuperscript{75} Yet, if this is true of the difference between information and storytelling, how does one understand the form this distinction has in what appears to be a context of seemingly endless instantaneous image proliferation?

Recently, theorist on post-industrial capitalism and media production, Franco Berardi, and essay filmmaker, Hito Steyerl, have complicated the notion of the immediacy of information and a more timeless quality of storytelling in what they see as the transformation of images beginning in 1977. For Berardi, in 1977

\begin{quote}
human history reached a turning point. Heroes died, or, more accurately, they disappeared. They were not killed by the foes of heroism, but were transferred to another dimension, dissolved, transformed into ghosts. The human race, misled by burlesque heroes made of deceptive electromagnetic substances, lost faith in the reality of life, and started believing only in the infinite proliferation of images.\textsuperscript{76}
\end{quote}

For Steyerl, beginning in 1977, “the immortality of the thing is its finitude, not its eternity.” The hero is no longer a protagonist whose ability to endure comes from surviving obstacles but from the hero’s “ability to be xeroxed, recycled, and reincarnated. Destruction will alter its form and appearance, yet its substance will be untouched.”\textsuperscript{77}

Here, Berardi and Steyerl see 1977 as a point within a trajectory that shifts. While both Berardi and Steyerl argue that 1977 marks a point at which causal narratives become sequential

\textsuperscript{74} Williams, Marxism and Literature, 121-127.
\textsuperscript{76} Franco “Bifo” Berardi, introduction to Wretched of the Screen, (Berlin, Germany: Sternberg Press, 2012), 9.
\textsuperscript{77} Hito Steyerl, “A Thing Like You and Me,” in Wretched of the Screen, 49.
proliferation, their assumptions of this shift rest on an underlying causal chain that must necessarily persist if it is to be delineated. Nevertheless, their ideas concerning infinite image proliferation and reincarnated copies as an endurance of the transient as roughly beginning in 1977 are worth considering in light of the exponential growth in the production, recycling and circulation of recorded media.

The mechanisms of the clock and calendar both measure narrative traps and their morphing and cannibalizing trajectories. The dispersion of ideological framings in the invention of the West, especially the framing of oppositional dichotomies (church vs. state, individual vs. group, community vs. society, etc.), narrative forms (the novel, ballet, constitutionality, etc.) and temporal descriptions (chronology, sequence, simultaneity, etc.) and the partial inversions of Western dominance through its very global dominance have disrupted the coherence of a certain Euro-American master dramatic emplotting of micro events and stories, a master emplotting that was perhaps more centered and visible in sites of the West in the marker of 1977.\textsuperscript{78} The opening up of this narrative to other claims of it or to it, including continual and competing critiques of the West and many claims of ontological cultural difference from it as well as the ongoing unwelcomed coercion of the West’s contradictions on its historic others may all point towards the contradictions of getting beyond the Western dramatic emplotting of world dominance. This opening up does not relieve the West or Globalization of its hegemony as it continuously shifts to multiple geographical, cultural and economic centers of power. In addition, it also sticks with the dramatic emplotment of the continuous unfolding and inevitability of the West as “progress” in its trajectories of time, even if its arrow of time ends in the static, sensorial, and repetitive within industrial reproduction.

\textsuperscript{78} Appadurai, \textit{Modernity at Large}, 36.
For Berardi, 1977 is the point at which a “collapse of the western mind” took on a subterranean trajectory, shifting to a “precipitous rhythm of an uncontainable catastrophe,” one marked most notably by a change from a complete faith in unlimited growth, i.e., a faith in “progress,” to a consciousness concerning finite resources for a growth which continues despite this obvious diminished future.\textsuperscript{79} Chakrabarty has argued for a provincializing of Europe as theoretical center of universal history, a critique he sees as self-consciously part of a wave of postcolonial and poststructural thought since at least the late 1970s. Yet, recently he has since begun to see the need for a new kind of universal history as it relates to planetary climate change, one that can study the interdependency of actions on not just a global scale which narrowly focuses on the spatial and temporal mapping of social and economic worlds but one that can focuses on our planetary ecology.\textsuperscript{80}

Considering this renewed consciousness of ecological circulations and interdependencies, the concept of the West can now feel antiquated along a chronology of change, not as a set of phenomena or events but as a necessarily outdated framing of space and time. The West can feel to be more at home in 1977, the temporal subject of this dissertation than in the late 2010s, the time of this dissertation’s writing, even as this West’s calendrical systems continue to successfully and banally mark cycles.

2.2 Defamiliarization and Nostalgia without Memory of Past Repetitions in Remix

Remix is one arts practice methodology writ large on which I base this dissertation. While remix is often associated with the subversive appropriation or hacking of corporate media

\textsuperscript{79} Berardi, \textit{After the Future}, 50.
by individual artists, I see this notion as complicated by the demand for individuals to circulate image, words and sounds if they are to be explicit consumers of such material. Remix is a basic language of the essay film. Remix is also a complex phenomenon in multiple overlapping aesthetic, political and social roles or practices. It can be practiced as a grand political gesture of opposition, a new institutional practice or subversion. It can also be seen as part of a banal circulation of recordings, citations, information, interpretations, etc. in immanent practical communication in contemporary networked media. It can be avant-garde, mainstream, dominant, subordinate, normative, subversive, marginal, indigenous and planetary.

2.2.1 Heteroglossia

This obvious and overt phenomenon of recycling and recombining can be seen in concepts of heteroglossia and speech genres theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin as underlying all rhetorical or persuasive messaging and meaning formations, not just in the recombination and recontextualization of discrete modern recorded and mechanically or digitally reproducible media artifacts and fragments.\(^8^1\) While remix often depends on clashing juxtapositions and disjunctures, emphasizing differently sourced material, Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia is more concerned with the interdependence of difference and contradictions, both as aesthetic strategy within realism and as fundamental to language itself. Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia at first glance appears to only assume a juxtaposition of self-contained voices brought together, but Bakhtin studied it in the apparent naturalism within 19th century social realist novels. Bakhtin claims that in social realism a speaking person can be seen as the constructed reworkings of other

people’s speech or perspectives both present within a given story and beyond its pages as people constantly rework and reorder their voice in a continuous flux which can never have any kind of originating ground.  

His concept of speech genres, on the other hand, is more concerned with general linguistics, contesting pervasive Adamic notions of a pure ground of word and world in forms of speech, aesthetically framed or not, and the treatment of listening as a purely passive or receptive position Bakhtin sees in much of Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic model. Languages are not contained wholes, yet individual utterances can develop relatively stable speech genres. Languages and meanings are not just representations of the world, separate from it but rather we are born into a world of dynamic ever changing forms and perceived meanings within social languages which fluctuate in and out of stable forms.

2.2.2 Compilations, Detournement and Defamiliarization

The recycling and reuse of previously existing recordings produced elsewhere can seem like a mere electronic example of heteroglossia and speech genres. The mere material appropriative repetition of discrete recordings exists within the frame of dynamic meaning formations. However, the element of reproducibility of recordings can create the impression of merely reiterating in order to transform through editing as both selection or curation and structuring works.

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84 Ibid., 60.
Compilation films are one form of filmmaking which can straddle a wide range of remix media cultural practices. They can utilize already existing audiovisual or moving images to reinstill one’s own well-healed sympathies, whether the materials are treated with sentimental affection, aesthetic or political disgust or derision, formal analysis, phenomenological fascination or any combination thereof.

Often compilation films seek pattern recognition of likeness and depend on the formal appearance of repetition in order to bring out their desired cognitive effect while the curatorial choices based on a theme seek to reinforce the emotional affect behind the intentions of the compilation. Such films can depend on playback, editing and copying technologies as well as access and quantity of source material. They are produced and consumed in a wide variety of social milieus and states of contemplative as well as distracted reception, both as authored and anonymous.

Compilations can seek to preserve marginalized film history by channeling its restoration and media migration through well-established institutions such as the DVD boxset, *Pioneers of African American Cinema* (2015), showcasing films from 1910s-1940s through the Library of Congress and Kino Lorber. Dylan Marron’s *Every Single Word* (2015) shows the myriad ways in which Hollywood films reduce actors and characters of color to walk on roles, utilizing the quantifiable cornucopia effect of pattern recognition to show a certain media desert within it as many lines for characters of color in the films Marron chooses total less than a minute per film. Along with the thousands, if not millions, of compilation videos on YouTube, films or videos such as *Our Century* (1983), *Atomic Café* (1982), *Gringo in Mananaland, dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* and *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003) were able to create their sonic and visual essayistic arguments through having relatively easy access to film and video libraries in the 1980s-90s.
Compilations are meant to be discontinuous or rather focus on presences to be connected by contrast and comparison as opposed to narrative causality, like the early days of pre-narrative or pre-dramatic plot when film was exhibited as a series of causally unrelated strips of reality. Compilations can be experienced as Sergei Eisenstein’s montage of attractions against continuous, plot-driven films that were just beginning to develop in cinema’s early decades. However, compilation films since the late 1970s come out of audiovisual culture determined by more complex layers of media familiarity and literacy. Regardless of one’s perception of them as formulaic, a poor man’s curating, too affectionate, too easy and unoriginal the more ubiquitous the practice becomes, compilations do point to Vivian Sobchack’s observation that signifying in cinema often relies on perceptions doubling as expressions remix is dependent on.\(^85\)

*Detournement* as theorized by Guy Debord and Gil Wolman can be conceived as (re)appropriation by critical publics of what has existed in the commons. In the late 1970s, “no-budget” appropriation film and video art as an unauthorized stripping or cut-up of mass-produced audiovisual media can still be seen as dependent on access to or embeddedness in various economies—commercial, state, educational, or even organized yet unofficial shadow economies, most notably in the adult film industry. To understand these practices as “no budget” due to their stealth or unpermitted looting or salvaging points to the division of economically invested production sites and publics, and the investment in audiovisual technologies small-scale collectives had to make as laborers within institutions and as independent producers.

In the field of (re)appropriative video art, Dara Birnbaum was able to create feminist political video works such as *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978) by copying

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commercial material while working as a post-production editor.\textsuperscript{86} In order to make work that intended to critically analyze televisual imagery of a suburban middle-class woman monotonously and repeatedly transforming into the superheroine, Wonder Woman, Birnbaum worked directly with televisual narratives and aesthetics by working with a direct product of those aesthetics. In 1977 while working as a projectionist at an adult film theater, Craig Baldwin spliced together film strips cut out of porn films lying on the floor for his now lost appropriation film, \textit{Flick Skin} (1977).\textsuperscript{87}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{technology_transformation_wonder_woman.jpg}
\caption{Still from \textit{Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman} by Dara Birnbaum, 1978. Footage from \textit{Wonder Woman} (1975-1979) developed by Stanley Ralph Ross.}
\end{figure}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{87} David Cox, “Media Meltdown,” \textit{21C Magazine}, no. 25 (1997). Accessed on Sept. 03, 2018, http://sensesofcinema.com/2001/craig-baldwin/baldwin-meltdown/. Because they were asked by locally appointed civic censors or for purposes of avoiding outside censorship, or to cut out “non-titillating” shots/scenes, adult theater owners often cut their own versions of adult films for their own local screenings right there in the projection booth just as the booth had been the space for editing in the early days of cinema.
\end{flushright}
Such remix works can attempt to do what Viktor Shklovsky termed “defamiliarization.” The Russian Formalist literary theorist and screenwriter saw art, in so far as it is thinking in images, as a suspect way of organizing heterogeneous objects into groups where the unknown can be explained through the known. Images either serve as constants with ever changing subjects or they are simplified versions of what is explained. Images can be predicated on bringing us closer to understanding, thus they can become better known than the complexities they are supposed to represent. Images can be made which deliver the greatest number of ideas in the least amount of images or impressions. In this scheme, one must be laborious in order to require the least amount of effort from an audience which leads to a habitual perception which in turn becomes automatic. We do not see images but only recognize them by predominant attributes. Slowly in this rough recognition, such objects become less recognizable in their
automatic understanding. Here, repetition (even unpredictable and idiosyncratic) replaces memory. “Defamiliarization” becomes a means to combat this automation of reception. It is a way of treating materials that slow down understanding, making comprehension laborious.

With its long-standing, centuries-old predecessors in newsprint journalism, remix is now obviously a prominent feature of rolling television news coverage, weaving stories in and out of circulation in bits and pieces. Newspapers appear to treat time as a neutral ground which both rationalizes the ordering of stories, not just in rationalized spatial divisions (local, regional, national and international sections) or taxonomic divisions of social activity (sports, entertainment, politics, business and finance, comics, etc.) but also juxtaposes stories as happening simultaneously. In the *New York Daily News* on April 29, 1977, as can be seen in figure 2.3, to the left of an advertisement for Alexander’s department store appears an announcement concerning the life sentences of the leaders of the Red Army Faction sitting above a blurb about the Consumer Product Commission voting 4 to 0 to ban spackling compounds and other products which contain asbestos. This story sits next to a report on a blowout of an oil rig in the North Sea. According to Benedict Anderson, the linkage between these stories can be imagined as calendrical coincidence as the date becomes the container which contains all other containers of categories as part of a steady onward marking of time. Some stories continue while others have only a brief walk-on line. The chronology of the newspaper creates a plot structure which assures us that characters, whether persons, places, things or events which appear to a given public go on elsewhere. Simultaneous juxtaposition, rather than opposing itself to

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91 Ibid.
cause and effect plots, reinforces the impression of a transparent reality in which causality and plots of action are commonsensical and not merely sequential.\(^2\)
Rolling news on television began most prominently in the US in CNN’s coverage of the Gulf War in 1991. Mimicking both Sergei Eisenstein’s well-known concepts of montage already well-practiced within Hollywood and Dziga Vertov’s rhythmic KinoPravda newsreels, CNN created its own version of the montage of attractions by mixing b-roll footage of the aftermath of the war in southern Iraq and Kuwait shot by CNN with, maps, photos of reporters, and footage of smart bombs hitting their targets produced by the military as can be seen in figures 2.4 and 2.5. Footage was further inter-spliced with commercials and live news anchor commentary, and repetitively aired in newer combinations which could weave momentary narratives in and out continuously as viewers flipped through channels or occupied themselves with something else.\(^93\) In other words, CNN developed their technique of a montage of attractions not to defamiliarize but to work with the automatic and familiar practice of distractive channel surfing to get audiences to follow CNN’s live, ongoing and disjointed narratives as an intense diffused presence of developmental and causal storytelling. The news could become a focus of attention with soap operatic opening remarks, interpolations and action teasers, and simultaneously something profoundly pushed into an ambient background as a mediascape.\(^94\)


Remix can specifically refer to appropriating copyrighted material without permission, often as a means of subverting it. Yet, such notions must be seen in the context of larger
recursive recyclings. Remix can also be seen as an exclusive, protected and officiated commercial practice that can deliberately adopt polemic editing techniques as those already practiced under centralized and dominant control. This can be a matter of familiarity and popularity rather than political co-option. In attempts to create alternative, oppositional or resistive meanings, which often become popular and familiar, polemic forms of editing can be integrated into larger institutional practices or pushed into obscure or unfamiliar residual past media right along with other narrative techniques including formerly ubiquitous institutional and now wholly obscure and archaic.

2.2.3 Shifting Sites and Practices of the Archival

The appropriation and reuse of past audio and visual material can also produce a sense of what Cinema and Media Studies theorist, Jaimie Baron, calls “temporal disparity” between a then and a now and “intentional disparity,” or a rhetorical or social gap. We can attribute an original intention not just to a filmmaker but to a “social milieu” or “rhetorical situation” that is other than that of the appropriator.95 Previous production, use and reception contexts can be purely imagined, or intentionally speculative, I might add. Baron suggests that official and professional film or video archives have lost their standing as the holders of authentic documents for the production of documentaries.96 Along with this, Baron sees the difference between organized and housed archival footage and random “found” footage as becoming “increasingly difficult to justify.”97 As such, Baron believes the archival is less a reflection of what a

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96 Ibid., 16.
97 Ibid.
document is or where it is stored and more of an experience.\textsuperscript{98} It is an “archival effect,” or the experience of footage as being shot in the past as it is juxtaposed with other footage or understood through extratextual knowledge.\textsuperscript{99} Or it is an “archival affect,” an emotional rather than epistemological effect “based in the revelation of temporal disparity.”\textsuperscript{100}

We can see these issues of intentional and temporal disparity in Johan Grimonprez’s \textit{dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y} from 1997, which eventually became about airplane hijacking the 1960s-80s. In the late 1990s, news footage was still physically stored or archived out of circulation. Grimonprez searched through news reports from airports in corporate media archives in order to find footage of people greeting and waving goodbye to their loved ones over decades, something more likely to be found in home movies not instantly accessible in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{101} Instead, the official news footage he found from the 1960s-80s concerned itself most prominently and conspicuously with affectionate familial greeting’s emotional and social opposite—hostile and impersonal airplane hijackings, along with the often calm, clear-headed or happily exhilarated attitudes of passengers caught up in these spectacles.\textsuperscript{102}

Intentional mining for past footage can be reflective of changing conceptions of archival systems. As Baron conceives of the archival more as an experience than as something in documents themselves, others recently have reconfigured the archival as more connected to communicative memory, repertoires, and performance. Piracy theoretician, Ravi Sundaram sees informality as becoming central to officialdom in digital cultures in the past decade.\textsuperscript{103} Media archaeologist, Wolfgang Ernst believes digital computer systems of storage and random access memory have changed the retrieval of data from systems of primary and non-circulating archival

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{101} Johan Grimonprez, “\textit{It’s a poor sort of memory,}” 231.
\textsuperscript{103} Sundaram, “Postcolonial Media After the Informal.”
documents to systems of “use-oriented” dynarchives which necessitate continuous updating rather than non-circulating preservation. The older 20th century bureaucratic archive is “preserved time,” while digital archives have no macrotemporal index with set batches of data and must be algorithmically processed anew on a continuing basis.\textsuperscript{104} Furthermore, “the so-called cyberspace is not primarily about memory as cultural record but rather about a performative form of memory as communication.”\textsuperscript{105} Older dichotomies of the past and present become overwhelmed in time-shifting. This is similar to Wendy Hui Hyung Chun’s observation that digital media mixes the transitory with the enduring “by making the permanent into an enduring ephemeral.”\textsuperscript{106} While Chun’s conception seems to show a dramatic shift in experiences of time in electronic media, we can certainly wonder if this is that much different than Benedict Anderson’s conception of Benjaminian “homogeneous empty time” as a bad infinity.\textsuperscript{107} Yet, Sundaram, Ernst and Chun’s concepts of informality, performative memory and enduring ephemerals all point to changes in associations of archives as domineering memory and aural repertoires as embodied memory.

For Performance Studies scholar, Diana Taylor, logocentric archival memory is based on the premise that documents and objects remain unmediated while the systems and values of scholarship and record-keeping change.\textsuperscript{108} Repertoire, for Taylor, on the other hand is associated with ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge which makes individual agency possible for discovery with embodied memory.\textsuperscript{109} While Taylor’s interpretation of archive from 2003 allows

\textsuperscript{104} Wolfgang Ernst, \textit{Digital Memory and the Archive}, ed. Jussi Parikka (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2013), 82.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 99.
\textsuperscript{107} Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, 33.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 20.
for a critique of Eurocentric archival models of knowledge and memory, Sundaram, Ernst and Chun’s newer descriptive conceptions of changes in archives allow us to see the ways in which older dominant practices of storage and information retrieval have already shifted into being ephemeral themselves in emerging out of older archival systems of information retrieval from prosthetic storage outside any embodied memory.

One can see a Manichean conceptual frame of domination of one particular and essentialized practice over another, especially of archive record keeping over ephemeral performance. Yet, by focusing on particular practices, one can become oblivious to dynamic processes of how forms and practices can continually change within communication norms and hierarchies. Sundaram, Ernst, and Chun point to the ways in which decentralized networks of performative communication have become a new form of hegemonic practice.

Even a certain freedom to create a defamiliarized past of mass-reproducible media through an aesthetic performance of it does not free oneself from dominant communicative practices. Such practices are adaptable to their critiques and their interests often converge with those critiques over time. They are never inherently anti-performative or exclusively tied to only externalized records. Communications of dominance can easily develop media technologies of ephemeral networked databases, assimilating multiple practices of the supposedly liberating practice of repertoire over prosthetic documents or artifacts, creating new cultural memories tied to evolving corporate communications systems. Inherited idiosyncrasies of cultural difference themselves can become partially invented by and dependent on these new dominant forms of communication.
2.2.4 Anachronisms and Nostalgia Without Memory

Benjamin’s claims concerning the difference between information and storytelling in the context of an age of creative destruction in reproduction comes with a set of overlapping paradoxes. It is observable that stories can indeed be treated or experienced as time-crucial information dependent on a given moment in a general state of distraction for their reception. Their ability to survive their moment of newness can partially depend on their ability to adapt to technical changes in media reproduction. However, can’t the fractured details of artifacts, i.e., pieces of information perceived as squandered to their past moment and analyzed accordingly, from a rapidly disappearing history, often from within one’s lifetime, be what triggers the reactionary totalizing symbolism of narrative continuity with a selective past? In addition, can’t fractured details from fading rhetorical games of the past be just as exploitable as restorative narratives of continuous tradition?

Culture may be defined as an acquired habit which becomes a second nature that is continuously transformed through creative destruction. However, what often makes sense in a culture is the anachronistic which appears in the spectral time of survivals, a framing of time which could be understood as the entanglement of a perception of progress with one of degeneration which cross incessantly within contradictory temporal states. \(^{110}\) Here, culture is not perceived as a process as in the cultivation of second natures as an episteme acquired through action, but in identities or in some kind of frame of nominal objects or images. \(^{111}\) The incessant recycling of audiovisual media both adds to this complexity and glosses over it. It can create an equivocation between knowing, understanding or being familiar with an event and the existence or appearance of such an event as a thing. This uncanny equivocation can be the anachronistic

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which gives culture its sense of being both a process and an identity. In US audiovisual media, this can be seen in repetitious reuses of footage of death and destruction such as the 18.8 seconds of the Zapruder film of President Kennedy’s assassination or the explosion of the Twin Towers on 9/11. These two examples have become so overly familiar as to render what they document, not unknowable but easily forgettable or at least unnoticeable or unremarkable in their familiarity. Their repetition keeps alive the unexpected spectacle in ubiquitous and anonymous public moments in time while simultaneously pushing them into the banal, everyday ambient background of mediascapes as newer and continuously shifting centralized spectacles replace them.

Recordings of or from a past can be raw materials as displaced things, no matter how overly or underlie repeated. For George Didi-Huberman, permanence of culture is not to be found in any essence or archetype, but appears as “an anachronistic feature,” “a displaced thing.”

While Didi-Huberman is describing a temporal displacement, one can experience a temporal-spatial, anachronistic displacement in Appadurai’s nostalgia without memory in looking at recorded media of the past forty years. Within global mediascapes this can be joyfully intoxicating. It can also produce contempt or anxiety as it often assumes the future of one’s own culture is often the past of another in some inevitable trajectory of time, or because assumed hierarchies of trajectories are disrupted, dulled, inverted or diffused. A contemporary European Spanish-speaking performer can perfectly imitate the English of a Delta-Blues record through repeated listenings, while a drunk white suburban patron at a bar in Kansas City in the early 2000s can sing a West Coast gangsta rap song with the aid of a karaoke machine manufactured in one of Guangdong China’s special economic zones. Such experiences of real and simulated cultural fusions can be self-consciously and unconsciously experienced in ways that celebrate,

\(^{112}\) Ibid., 63.
vilify, critically view with suspicion or ignore the political tensions such nostalgia without memory coerces, compels or conditions us to experience.

Cultural fusions are not fusions of anachronistic features per se, especially as such fusions become a feature of everyday life and not part of a ground-clearing aesthetic gesture. However, employing anachronisms can be a means of showcasing how ambiguous authentic and simulated displacements can be caught up in the anxiety producing “spectre of comparisons” in which we cannot experience things for their own sake but are in a predicament of seeing them both up-close and far away in suspiciously interchangeable contexts.\textsuperscript{113} The transnational exportation of the economic and social aspirations of white working-class youth in Brooklyn in \textit{Saturday Night Fever} in 1977, as can be seen in figures 2.6 and 2.7 has since become the basis for two feature fiction films about \textit{Saturday Night Fever}’s historical transnational cultural reception in the late 1970s. One set in the dark days of Pinochet’s repressive regime in Chile is about a middle-aged man’s aspiration to win a television look-alike contest as John Travolta’s character, \textit{Tony Manero} (dir. Pablo Larrain, 2008), as seen in figures 2.8 and 2.9. The other, a light-hearted comedy, is about a young man’s fantasized visitations of Tony Manero to teach him how to disco dance. It depicts Singapore in the late 1970s as ripe for the acceptance of queer sexuality for reasons of family cohesion as well as individual freedom in the transformation of the city-nation’s economy “from Third World to First World” in a single generation, \textit{Forever Fever} (dir. Glen Goei, 1998) as seen in figures 2.10 and 2.11.\textsuperscript{114}


FIGURE 2.7. Still from *Tony Manero* directed by Pablo Larrain, 2008.


FIGURE 2.10. Still from *Tony Manero* directed by Pablo Larrain, 2008.

While both films obviously mimic the 1977 film with a great degree of self-aware irony, one can see how *Saturday Night Fever* is about mimicry itself where class as an identity-marker is something that can be simulated in the world of aspiration as moneyed classes may lose their moral and psychological markers as “class is neither community nor culture nor occupation nor power but a mere affect that the selective few, the chosen ones, can drop. A Matisse print, a borrowed apartment, and the ability to do the hustle are all that is needed.”¹¹⁵ Class can be relegated to a spatial distance or temporal past to be taken up in the spectre of comparisons.¹¹⁶ There can arise a consciously planetary past experienced via mediation which simultaneously flattens, maintains old and reconfigures new global interwoven movements of time by creating (perhaps suspiciously commodifiable) recursions of displaced things which are never allowed to be matter-of-fact but must exist in a web of intra-mimetic simulacra.

For Didi-Huberman, artifacts can connote being evolutionarily out-of-date in the frame of historical progressivism from the 19th century, a frame that can itself appear to be outdated.¹¹⁷ Reading *Tony Manero* and *Forever Fever* as mere examples of what gets derived from an older postwar Americanization of the world can appear outdated when considering cultural globalization and the newer dubious geographical trajectories of neoliberalism. Yet, it is perhaps the real magic of artifacts that they survive their own deaths by disappearing from view only to reappear long after being forgotten and no longer expected or known to exist.¹¹⁸

The condition of appearing to be born into a transnational and globalizing condition of mass-media confounds assumed dichotomies of history and cultural memory. History is often perceived as something dubiously objective about the past as part of a blatant imperial scientific

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¹¹⁶ Ibid.
¹¹⁸ Ibid., 68.
inquiry arising out of colonialism, imperialism and nationalism, while cultural memory, on the other hand, is identity-laden and often heroically held up to be authentically produced within small communities from below.\textsuperscript{119} Transnational or globally circulating populist mass-media confounds both extremes of equivocating both hegemony with suspicious objectivity, and small-scale witnessing or marginality with authentic subjectivity. Being born into this flux of media points to the ways in which controlling chronologies become confused and distorted by the media records made possible by these very same controlling chronologies. Such circulations confound and, more importantly, change distinctions between popular or populist media production and experimental media art, often delineated along divisive lines of social, economic, racial and gendered classes for producers, subjects, and audiences alike. These circulations also show how much culture as displaced anachronistic things or artifacts (rather than as processes) make apparent the co-creation of tradition and modernity, that is, the co-creation of various selective invented continuations of a past and the creative destruction of such continuations.

If assumptions of history and cultural memory are perceived as in flux, how could one understand this within a grand cohesive, homogenous trajectorism, let alone begin to assume to speak from a personal voice concerning a personal story? Voice and memory are complicated by media’s global or planetary disunification that is in part shaped by imperial tools of chronology on which spatial and temporal control, as well as 1977 itself, is often based. Cultural inheritance in globally circulating media can be seen as a condition of distanced familiarity, something seen in remix culture. Under such conditions, political criticality must pay attention to ways in which interests converge, diverge and change over time, while personal narrative must question the very notion of the personal within itself as a given category of experience in order to paradoxically become personal, something essay films routinely emphasize.

\textsuperscript{119} Astrid Erill, \textit{Media and Cultural Memory} (Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 6-7.
2.3 Media Circulation in and through Essay Films

Essay films make up an often convolutedly defined film genre or methodology which promises to address *heteroglossia* within the *mediascapes* of available imagistic strips of reality and narrative constructions based on imagined criteria from perceived elsewheres, or appropriations for often autobiographical purposes. Such nebulous films often approach these issues from the standpoint of political complicity, relativity, ambivalence and contradiction. Essay films have been defined as mixing genres as well as discrete audiovisual media artifacts as records which appear to document pasts while re-producing them. The essay film can also be seen as a method to documentary, developed as a European filmmaking practice contrarian to Eurocentrism, especially during postwar de- or recolonization. Only after the end of formal colonial rule in the 1970s and again after the Cold War in the 1990s do essay films get taken up as a global or transnational film practice to address neocolonial realities. However, this transformation can be seen as running parallel to another transformation of the essayistic from critical margins to being reflective of ubiquitous copy and paste practices while still remaining a relatively obscure film genre. As essay films become globalized out of critical European filmmaking, they can be seen as being imbricated with new power dynamics.

2.3.1 Definitions of the Essay Film

If there is something to be agreed upon concerning descriptions, definitions and histories or genealogies of essay films as a form, genre or methodology of filmmaking, it is that such attempts at theorizing and historicizing have shown how difficult such endeavors can be.\(^{120}\) Theorists often agree on defining essay films as a “hybrid form that crosses boundaries and rests

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somewhere between fiction and nonfiction cinema,“\textsuperscript{121} an “in-between genre,”\textsuperscript{122} “considered to be more ‘subjective’ than the documentary, because its relation to the evidentiary ground of documentary is looser, more speculative, and more suggestive.”\textsuperscript{123} Such proclamations are based on comparisons of already- or historically-existing categories—subjectivity, text, artifact, community vs. society, universalism, local knowledge, etc.— or genres—such as fiction, non-fiction, documentary, expository description, journalism, philosophy, biography, dramatic realism, etc.—or methodologies of filmmaking—such as ethnofiction, controlled studio production, travelogue, improvization, etc.

In the development of the essay film since the end of WWII, we may see the essayistic as reacting against established conventions of duality between fiction and nonfiction and the objectification of people, cultures, events and experiences that the documentary genre had come to be emblematic of. However, essay filmmaker, Trinh T. Minh-ha, offers a broader context in which documentary can be seen in its own relationship to other artistic and rhetorical forms: “The fathers of documentary initially insisted that documentary is not News, but Art,” and “its essence is not information (as in the hundreds of tweedle-dum ‘industrials’ or worker-education films); not reportage; not newsreels; but something close to ‘a creative treatment of actuality’ (Grierson’s renowned definition).”\textsuperscript{124}

While the specific term “essay film” may be traced back to Hans Richter’s written essay, “The Essay Film: A New Type of Documentary Film,” written in 1940 during WWII, many film historians and essay film theorists have attempted to trace prior examples of essay films, such as Luis Buñuel’s \textit{Land Without Bread} (1933), DW Griffith’s \textit{A Corner of Wheat} (1909), Jean

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} Elsaesser, “The Essay Film: From Festival Favorite to Flexible Commodity Form,” in \textit{Essays on the Essay Film}, 240.
\end{flushright}
Vigo’s *À propos de Nice* (1930) and Dziga Vertov’s *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), including Richter’s use of his own film, *Inflation* (1927) in his invention of the term “essay film.” In representing complex themes, rather than directly observable mechanical processes, Richter states:

> The essay film, in its attempt to make the invisible world of imagination, thoughts, and ideas visible, can draw from an incomparably larger reservoir of expressive means than can the pure documentary film. Since in the essay film the filmmaker is not bound by the depiction of external phenomena and the constraints of chronological sequences, but, on the contrary, has to enlist material from everywhere, the filmmaker can bounce around freely in space and time. For example, he can switch from objective representation to fantastic allegory and from there to a staged scene.

One may add that the essay film—beyond being defined as hybrid, in-between, subjective, more art than news—can be seen as a contrarian filmmaking in its social or political position or role in critically engaging with film practices at any given time, often to particular imagined audiences. Contrarian in this sense is not necessarily oppositional or resistive to perceived dominant audiovisual practices, but ambivalently and self-reflexively critical of one’s own position. As such, this contrarian yet ambivalent critical approach can be understood as not divorced from visual pleasure nor is it disengaged with popular visual culture as essay films themselves work with the same audiovisual mass-media technologies as that which they investigate. It is perhaps a “genre” or method that is hard to define because of its dependency on other film practices in order to insert itself into discourse by adopting/appropriating and critically engaging with elements of already existing film forms and practices. In this sense, essay films can be seen as instances of secondary discourses, rhetorical discourses that depend on other more dominant or ubiquitous rhetorical discourses to, in a certain sense, develop their

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own autonomy and authority not by adhering to the given conventions of given discourses but by stealing them as strategies—strategies for often elusive or politically ambivalent ends.

Notions of the essay film share much in common with definitions of literary forms and movements. Many definitions of the essay film follow Bakhtin’s definition of the novel as a bastard form mixing fiction with personal confession, philosophical diatribe with journalistic reporting, a mixed genre (of the novel) Bakhtin analyzed as constructed, not in early twentieth century experimental or stream of consciousness text production but in the seaming naturalism of social realist novels.\(^\text{128}\) In some ways, the essay film, as a European film methodology for confounding hierarchies of audiovisual forms of genres, shares similarities with the New Journalism of the 1960s-70s in the United States in the ways the latter tried to confound prevailing literary hierarchies where lowly anonymous fact finding or hack reporting became the means of producing allegorical US American epics or authorial Great American (non-fiction) Novels by applying middle-tier contextual or analytical journalism, or by being critically argumentative as in \textit{belle lettre} writing.\(^\text{129}\)

Furthermore, truth claims made about the written essay ignore certain cultural receptions of the form. The written essay is claimed by Adorno as speaking with a critical voice from various social margins.\(^\text{130}\) Yet, the written essay is one of the most ubiquitous creative non-fiction genres in formal public education in the age of mass-communication since the nineteenth century, a genre for professional public intellectuals and cultural tastemakers, the scientific form for the Humanities, and the quick read of internet blogs or think pieces.

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\(^{128}\) Bakhtin, \textit{The Dialogic Imagination}, 5.  
\(^{130}\) Adorno, \textit{Notes to Literature}, 16.
Adorno claims that the essay is a form that “thinks in fragments, just as reality is fragmentary, and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing them over.”\textsuperscript{131} Like the work of children who have not yet learned the divisions between scientific and artistic thinking, the essay positions itself in texts that are simply already there.\textsuperscript{132} It is this simple fact alone, i.e., previous texts mere existence, which gives essays their authority. The essay does not dwell in fundamental doubt which requires a rigorous scientific inquiry. For Adorno, the essayistic seeks to undermine scientific inquiry’s own objectified authority. It does not seek to fulfill demands for a closed inductive or deductive structure for an argument. By gaining ground in this dubious or suspicious manner, by assuming authority in pre-given materials and denying it in one’s own text, the essay gains a paradoxical critical tendency towards previous texts’ “own emphatic concepts.”\textsuperscript{133} In this manner, the essay aims at moving culture “to become mindful of its own untruth.”\textsuperscript{134}

Yet, Adorno also sees the essay as easily assimilated into serving the needs of a clientele or established consciousness.\textsuperscript{135} Certainly, the five paragraph written essay has been used as the dominant, ubiquitous, popular and pervasive form for accessible logical argumentation through storytelling in Anglo-American literary arts from primary to tertiary levels, as well as in various popular and populist press cultures. In addition to being a pedagogical function in conditioning structural thinking in children as well as a supposed childlike free-play with impressions and ideas, the essayistic has been treated as civically fundamental to a healthy democracy while simultaneously contributing to the professionalization of authority in discourse.

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 6.
Essay films, as compared to the ubiquity of written essays, can safely be said to be more obscure or relatively unknown. Yet they often involve reflecting upon the circulation of pervasive media images. For the most part these reflections from media and cultural margins do not just engage in a disdain for or rejection of the gluttony of images. These reflections as films or videos themselves often also reject critical distance or purely semiotic analysis, in some ways replacing purely written film theory. Instead, they revel in the same media systems, technologies, forms and contents of the media they appropriate and reflect on. Such films include: DeeDee Halleck’s Gringo in Mananaland about the depiction of Latin America as a subservient colonial other in Hollywood films, Naeem Mohiamen’s United Red Army about the live broadcast in Bangladesh in 1977 of a hijacked airplane by the Japanese Red Army contributing to a failed coup in newly independent Bangladesh, Mark Rappaport’s Rock Hudson’s Home Movies (1992) and Color Me Lavender (1997) both about the contradictions in retrospective post-Stonewall interpretations of Hollywood representations of masculinity ostensibly repressive of homosexuality in times before public gay liberation in the United States, or Oleg Mavromatti’s No Place for Fools (2014), utilizing footage from a seemingly contradictory pro-Putin gay man’s Youtube channel to (re)construct the historical Russian figure of the “wise fool” in the contemporary context of another person’s video blog or diary. Other films explore audiovisual circulation such as Maha Maamoun’s Domestic Tourism II (2008), MarwaArsanios’ Have You Ever Killed a Bear? or Becoming Jamila (2012-2013), Johan Grimonprez’s dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y (1997), Andrei Ujica and Harun Farocki’s Videograms of a Revolution (1992), and Chris Marker’s seminal San Soleil (1983). All these films engage in critically analyzing, fantasizing about, and vocalizing suspicion concerning the circulation of images the films themselves circulate. Often the skepticism vocalized includes the filmmaker’s

136 Biemann, Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age, 22.
own complicity or duplicity in contributing to the withering away of a verifiable reality as images concerning that reality constantly circulate, or the skepticism aims at one’s own conflicting ideas and emotions of their own affinity for mediated personalities as a reflection of their self-identity (as in Joan Braderman’s Joan Does Dynasty).

2.3.2 Literary and Print “Origins of the Essay Film

Many theorists on the essay film have traced it to the early modern European written essay, as invented by Michel Montaigne in what he called his essays or “attempts.” And while he coined the term “essay” as his own writing genre, making him its inventor, this does limit one into thinking about the history of the essay as predetermined.

Many theorists have considered textual material in “print capitalism”—as information, as rhetoric, as theological treatises, as fables, as political proclamations, and especially as currency or capital—as the first modern industrial commodity.137 Elizabeth Eisenstein, Marshall McLuhan, Talal Asad and Benedict Anderson have all described printing as that which allowed for the formation of centralized states along with the standardization and individualization of localities in a web of circulating texts and images. For these theorists, this occurred both within Europe creating nodes or metropoles of political power and control (Eisenstein and McLuhan), and throughout the rest of the world creating and enforcing colonization (Asad and Anderson).

According specifically to Anderson in his Imagined Communities from 1983, print capitalism

137 Anderson, Imagined Communities, Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy (Toronto, Canada: Toronto University Press, 2011) and Eisenstein, The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe, Talal Asad, “Ethnographic Representation, Statistics and Modern Power,” in From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures, ed. Brian Keith Axel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 66-92. In Imagined Communities, Anderson states that aside from a lot of nonsense in his Gutenberg Galaxy, the one thing McLuhan was right about was his notion of the book as the first industrial commodity. While Anderson focuses on how printing affected the global reach of colonialism, Eisenstein focuses on what might hesitantly be thought of as a “colonialism” within Europe on a much slower, smaller and less traumatic and more interstitial scale with the centralization or states.
has created networks of communities of strangers and has contributed to the rise of nationalism
and nationstates out of colonialism. In this framing, the essay arises out of this mass produced
textual media environment of information, rhetorical declarations as law or criticism, scientific
inquiry, and self-portraiture for imagined isolated or singular readers as unassembled and
dispersed audiences. It is in this context that Montaigne as a former diplomat who isolated
himself in his tower began his self-proclaimed new genre. Text, even as persuasive
argumentation, could be seen as an integral part of the circulation of information as a commodity
creating new localities.

Elizabeth Eisenstein, in discussing the relationship of print media in early Modern
Europe to regional and cultural representation, points to the familiarity print media brought to
various print centers throughout Europe where

concepts pertaining to uniformity and to diversity—to the typical and to the unique—are interdependent.
They represent two sides of the same coin. In this regard one might consider the emergence of a new sense
of individualism as a by-product of the new forms of standardization. The more standardized the type,
indeed, the more compelling the sense of an idiosyncratic personal self.138

Such delineated origins come with their own blind spots and limitations.139 Tracing the
essay film to an earlier literary incarnation can enforce a certain verbal- and vococentrism,
ignoring the audiovisual form of essay films.140 Focus on the influence of mass reproduction
within Western spheres of influence in producing a mutually dependent or countervailing
personal self can rely too heavily on a technological determinism and the inevitability of Western

Limits of Vococentrism: Chris Marker, Hans Richter and the Essay Film,” SubStance 41, no. 2 (2012): 20 and
140 David Oscar Harvey, “The Limits of Vococentrism: Chris Marker, Hans Richter and the Essay Film,”
SubStance, 6-23.
trajectories many essay films fight against. It ignores technological and cultural flows that have circulated outside of strict Western chronologies.

Sometimes the origin story of the essay as one arising out of verbal communication technology is traced or noted so that a theorist might challenge or refute it. In 2009, John D’Agata situated a notion of the essayistic in *The List of Ziusudra* as an example of a cuneiform text which did not use cuneiform in its usual or normal form as an accounting language for monetary or administrative purposes of documenting assets and liabilities—the dominant writing of “nonfiction” that “was the worst kind of nonfiction there is: informational, literal, nothing about it mattering beyond the place it held for facts.”

D’Agata, while still following trajectories of civilizational origins, sees this nonfiction as allowing the Sumerians to economically flourish. Only after a flood destroys Sumer is the legendary lone survivor able to write something for purposes other than to receive bare facts for administrative purposes. *The List of Ziusudra* presents instead a list of practical advice for daily living in Sumer, a place whose administrative complexities have already disappeared. This contextualizing of what may be considered fiction and nonfiction, and the start of the essay after a system of recording debts and assets has been destroyed, is similar to and different from concerns about the essay that can be seen in media theories concerning the rise of print culture.

For Walter Benjamin, information is a parasite which *creeps into* discourse, destroying the narrative structures of oral storytelling which often spill over into textual variations.

Storytelling in this sense does not arise out of an already moribund tabulation of assets and

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142 Ibid. While not acknowledged in his interpretation of the *List of Ziusudra* as the first “essay,” the original clay tablet is believed to have been made at least a hundred years after the flood, is thought to be earlier variations on the flood within the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Noah and the flood within the Torah. Ziusudra is also thought to reference a king as the “voice” proclaiming the list as a continuation of the Sumerian royal bloodline, yet could also have been written *before* the flood took place.
liabilities and records of trade but are killed by such information.\textsuperscript{143} Stories within systems of information can utilize that which is most utilitarian for their own ostensibly non-utilitarian purposes, just as communication technologies develop which, as Benedict Anderson claims, do not produce commodities as quantities, such as sugar, oil, wood, etc., but produce information as a \textit{qualitative} commodity on a reproducible mass, i.e., \textit{quantifiable}, scale.\textsuperscript{144}

2.3.3 Postwar Essay Films

Many essay films arising after the end of formal colonial rule address postcolonial or neocolonial issues. Yet, much essay filmmaking can be traced to interwar and postwar French and German documentaries which sought to subvert the ethnic othering in much twentieth century anthropological filmmaking. Such subversions of anthropological filmmaking include Luis Buñuel’s \textit{Land Without Bread} (1953), Alan Resnais and Chris Marker’s \textit{Statues Also Die} (1953), Chris Marker’s \textit{Letters From Siberia} (1958), or Jean Rouch’s ethnofiction, \textit{Moi, un noir} (1958). Such documentaries can be understood as attempts to utilize the primary discourse of the ethnographic film in order to call attention to the ways in which film imports and exports cultures. These films attempt to defamiliarize the assumed Western “cultural contact” of colonialism often by pointing to the economic commodification behind such contacts and filmic transport in mediascapes. Such “origins” of essay filmmaking as an anti-Eurocentric film practice squarely emerging from European filmmakers critical of cultural hierarchies resulting from formal colonial rule, can also be seen as a reflection of the de- and recolonization process that took place after WWII.

\textsuperscript{144} Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, 34.
In *Statues Also Die*, footage from European ethnographic films of Africa are appropriated with a voiceover critiquing the theft of African statues for display in European museums and the subsequent mass production of statues by Africans for explicit sale without any pretense to cultural function for Africans themselves. The images in the film shift abruptly towards the end to focus on US American documentary and TV footage of African-American athletes, musicians and laborers thoroughly within urban industrial societies, i.e., thoroughly within Western colonial metropoles. These images are juxtaposed with rhetoric of classic anthropology idealizing indigenous labor which speaks both to the desire to restore what colonialism has destroyed and to see it continuing within new industrial conditions, even as such conditions contribute to the withering away of practices now being ossified into purely exchangeable images of Africanness. Originally produced for broadcast on French national television, the subversive documentary on perceptions of African art through the lens of colonialism was banned until the 1960s.145

![Still from Statues Also Die directed by Alain Resnais and Chris Marker, 1953.](image)

FIGURE 2.12. Still from *Statues Also Die* directed by Alain Resnais and Chris Marker, 1953.

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Thirty-four years later in 1987, the Black Audio Film Collective’s *Handsworth Songs*, using footage from the 1950s of black immigrants’ industrial labor and domestic life, describes the experience of first and second generation Caribbean and South Asian communities in Thatcher-era post-industrial urban areas forced to become mere reproducible media images living among the abandoned aspirations of modernization in the decaying British metropolis of Handsworth. Like *Statues Also Die*, *Handsworth Songs* focuses on the imageifying of culture. However, in thirty years’ time, the assumption of the future position of Western industrialization and the aspirational or exploited neocolonial position of anonymous immigrant labor in the West are both seen in *Handsworth Songs* as already deserted, with the colonial subject now becoming an image of post-industrial decay rather than an image of pre-industrial primitiveness or an image of aspiration for inclusion into industrial modernization.

Even in their focus on migration and mobility in transnational flows of images, essay films were regionally limited after WWII. While often more overtly practiced as political agitprop, one could count some Third Cinema experimental documentaries emerging from Latin America as essay films, such as *LBJ*, by Santiago Alvarez, founder and head of the post-revolutionary *Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos*, which like Dziga Vertov’s *KinoPravda* during the Russian Revolution, often sought to make the news a rhythmic experience of montage. French and German self-conscious confoundings of hierarchies and more overtly politically critical approaches to documentary filmmaking in Latin America were infrequent. However, the utopia of a New Internationalism by New Left Marxists certainly contributed to this concern for circulating images. This can even be said of Marxists such as Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino who in their manifesto, “Towards a Third Cinema,” argued for a cinema practice autonomous from Western imperialism as it sought for a non-aligned movement for filmmaking, independent even of filmmaking emerging from within
imperial metropoles critical or oppositional to that very same imperialism. Later, essay films became more concerned with newer human and media diasporas after the end to formal colonial rule beginning with Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* in the 1980s and especially later at the close of the Cold War in the 1990s.

### 2.3.4 Postcolonial and Post Cold War Essay Films

Many essay films arising from a critical postcolonial position in the 1990s can be understood as arising from the imbrication of colonial diasporas with European or Western institutions of cultural production. Postcolonial essay filmmaking in the context of representation by, about and for diaspora communities in the 1990s involved complicating the notion of a transparent representation of place especially as representation involves a dislocation into a floating or virtual “non-place.” Artists born into migratory displacement or mobility as well as artists who have sought out such movement can be seen as corresponding to the placelessness of the essayistic voice while “engaged in rewriting the historical dimensions of places.”

This position is not without its contradictions, often self-consciously addressed in essay films. These contradictions can be especially felt among diaspora communities immersed in Western literary and aesthetic methodologies. Postcoloniality can be understood, especially in the conditions of imminently emerging globalization from the 1970s-90s as a condition where more and more former colonial subjects and Global South citizens migrated to Western universities and cultural institutions and not just industrial labor. This migration is often seen by

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postcolonial theorists as the ability for some Western institutions to incorporate critiques forming at the ostensible margins of Western culture and dominance in the world.¹⁴⁸

In the world of academia and humanities scholarship, both analytical descriptions and oppositional movements are the intertwined—and perhaps not ideologically innocent—forces of describing or analyzing the changes or shifts in hegemonic practices (and practitioners) of the West and oppositional protests to such dominant forces. Kwame Anthony Appiah in his view of postcoloniality, states that it “is the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia: of a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained, group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other, and for Africa.” For Appiah, contemporary African life and culture have undergone transitions through colonialism, but are not postcolonial, i.e., they are part of a syncretism “made possible by the international exchange of commodities” but are “not a consequence of a space-clearing gesture” like the postcolonial or postmodern.¹⁴⁹

While Edward Said’s Orientalism, published in 1978, became a canonical text of postcolonial theory, Aijaz Ahmad, in 1992, in his sympathetic constructive critique of Said’s text, points out that while Orientalism could unpack the West’s othering of colonial subjects and gain “its authority from the way it panders to the most sentimental, the most extreme forms of Third-Worldist nationalism,” it was not “within the so-called ‘Third World’ that the book first appeared. Its global authority is in fact inseparable from the authority of those in the dominant

sectors of the metropolitan intelligentsia who first bestowed upon it the status of a modern classic” especially by middle-class immigrant and ethnic intellectuals.\textsuperscript{150} Furthermore, Ahmad points out that while \textit{Orientalism} provides a scathing critique of Western or European exoticizing, the text itself can be said to be closer aligned with the methodologies of comparative literature as a western academic discipline and is glaringly absent of any analysis of resistance literature arising from the very regions being “orientalized.”\textsuperscript{151} By placing its critique fully within the sphere of the West, Ahmad suggests that \textit{Orientalism} allows certain imbrications with Western nodes of power and nodes outside the control of Western hegemony to go unchecked. Ahmad’s critique points to the complexities of migration, social and economic class, and the influence of postcolonial theory arising from within Western metropoles and institutions.

This dubiously privileged position was critically analyzed in the 1990s-2000s by many artists often engaged in the contradictions of the “international exchange of commodities” in the global circulation of audiovisual presences of place. Such contradictions are addressed by Walid Ra’ad’s essayistic mockumentary, \textit{Hostage: The Bachar Tapes} (2000). In the film, Ra’ad creates a fictional alternative history of the Lebanese hostage crisis by creating believable fake hostage tapes whose reception as either faked or authentic is dependent on a given audience’s extratextual knowledge about the regionally-known Lebanese actor, Fadi Abi Samra, playing a speculative fictional “lesser known” Arab hostage taken captive with American hostages. Andrei Ujica and Harun Farocki’s \textit{Videograms of a Revolution} about the role the Romanian national television station played in both the dubious peaceful transfer of power from the Ceausescu regime and the leader’s televised assassination also addresses the international reception of an apparently national media event. \textit{Videograms} shows the agencies that arise from

\textsuperscript{150} Ahmad, \textit{In Theory}, 195.  
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 172.
the ecological balance of political systems, especially in times of transformation, as the TV station is critically analyzed as paradoxically politically neutral and politically necessary in the broadcasting of the revolution itself where the professional code remains as the dominant code appears abruptly to shift.  

While *Hostage* emphasizes the ability of local knowledge to better inform viewership, *Videograms* focuses on how local knowledge is not necessarily more informed than knowledge formed in the ether of mediascapes since much of the local is imbricated with that very ether.

In Mohaiemen’s *United Red Army*, the Japanese Red Army’s high jacking of a plane in newly independent Bangladesh inadvertently creates an opportunity for an attempted coup recorded by the plane’s international hostages as they snapped shots of military personnel they assumed where there concerning their own eventful fate, while the official live broadcast of the hijacking renders the stealth coup invisible to national and international publics of the beyond.

The Otolith Group’s *Otolith Project I* describes the experience of a British citizen of Indian descent who goes to her familial homeland to investigate the changes in India from a socialist national industrial economy to its newer neoliberal incarnation only to be met with the appearance of British red phone booths she just left behind. They appear to her as disposable simulacra on one of the many Indian film sets which occupy older abandoned Indian Congress era factories. Bollywood success in the free trade of cultural currency appears to replace intentional and polemic decolonizing national sovereignty.

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2.3.5 Contemporary Trends

Twentieth century rhetorical definitions of the essay as the form of a critical outside view that is “free of method and authority” and suspicious of notions of a strict binary of privileged free play vs. a cultural coercion of hybridity have more recently been called into question by essay filmmakers and theorists since the beginning of the present decade. In 2016, in their assessment of essay filmmaker, Harun Farocki’s, proposal, *What Ought to Be Done*, for an independent, self-organized, non-governmental, audiovisual archival institute developed in 1976 as if it were started 40 years later in 2016, Tom Holert, et al. attempt to compare the economic situation of “independent” art production in 1976 to 2016. While the authors believe that “Farocki rejected the ideological (and potentially sectarian) reflexes of a New Left, which in 1976 was already past its prime” and that his proposal was “extremely realistic in its conviction that the goal cannot be the creation of another highly precarious institution where the only reward for one’s work is one’s own idealism,” they state, “today, when founding an institute,
one is confronted with a different environment compared to Berlin in the 1970s,” since, “in 2016, invocations of independence and self-organization must confront the neoliberal reality of self-employment, startup hype, city marketing, and the increasing precarization of cultural work.”

Hito Steyerl, in 2011, claimed that Adorno’s 1958 notion that the essay as a “marginalized and often dismissed form of narrative” that “would challenge the coerced identity” of the industrial age is no longer valid in “post-Fordist globalization.” The conditions of the essayistic are different since “the essay no longer meddles with standardized and homogenous identities. Instead, the essayistic runs parallel to the post-Fordist coercion of difference, mobility, extreme flexibilization, and distracted modes of attention, whose ideal subjectivity is hybrid and supple.” These demands can be seen in how contemporary essays “reflect the ‘copy and paste’ ideologies of new global chains of production” which involve combining elements in new ways making such economic production chains essayistic themselves.

Steyerl perceives the precarious social position of essay filmmakers as wavering between selective visibility within museums and film festival circuits and the oblivion of massive public (in)visibility in social media platforms. This mimics Elizabeth Eisenstein’s perception of playwrights, poets, fabulists, satirists and romancers during the rise of printing in modern Europe. For Eisenstein, scribblers belonged to a “highly volatile, unstable status group” whose existence more traditional institutions of rank could not take into account, spanning the position

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154 Steyerl, “The Essay as Conformism? Some notes of Global Image Economies,” in Essays on the Essay Film, 276. Post-Fordism refers to the loosening of the standardization and centralization of production, the creation of shorter runs and dismantling of providing wages high enough for laborers to buy products by spreading labor and dividing it transnationally.
155 Ibid.
156 Ibid., 277.
of being arbiters of taste and supplying for a fee sensational commodities in an open market.\textsuperscript{158} The advancement of the industrial production of print, for Eisenstein, merely made this condition of volatility more acute.\textsuperscript{159} In the context of selective class mobility in US postwar prosperity in the 1960s, the essayistic in New Journalism could thrive under conditions of such hierarchical ambivalence.

Along with issues of precarious social positions interdependent with new communications technologies, essay filmmakers must confront changes in perceptions of local context in heterogeneous global media circulations. Global investigations into media mobility now must confront not standardization or cultural essentialism but codifications which can be continually recombined into newer productions of difference.\textsuperscript{160} Steyerl further addresses this new conundrum in her 2004 short essay film, \textit{November}, as she describes how an image of her childhood German friend, Andrea Wolf, has circulated into many contexts around the world after Wolf as a newly formed Kurdish revolutionary militant was assassinated, possibly by the Turkish military. Wolf shows up in a display at an adult movie theater in Germany, in a Kurdish political news report broadcast on satellite television and appearing on political protest posters in Bavaria. However, according to \textit{November}, it is not just Wolf’s image which circulates into new codifications, but the filmmaker, Steyerl herself, who is caught in the “labyrinth of traveling images.” As much as the posture of the militant hero may be malleable, “there’s another pose which is much more problematic. This is the pose of the sensitive and understanding filmmaker who tells a personal story, but I don’t understand anything and this pose is much more hypocritical than any Kurdish propaganda.”\textsuperscript{161}

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\textsuperscript{158} Eisenstein, \textit{The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe}, 103.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{160} Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, \textit{The New Spirit of Capitalism}, 445.
\textsuperscript{161} \textit{November}, directed by Hito Steyerl (Rotterdam, Netherlands: Wilfried Lentz, 2004).
\end{flushright}
If current pressures on global corporate media industries in their appeal to people with different cultural backgrounds in order to be monetarily successful has “left its mark on Hollywood’s business model and film genres,” the same has “also been affecting the products of the independent sector, traditionally defined as the art-house circuit and the film-festival networks.” In global competition, creativity is cultivated through funding or by “talent scouting in cinematically underdeveloped countries” in order to discover or incubate.

“Discovery” and “incubating” can both become dubious. One may view this state of affairs of talent scouting for or industrially creating the rewriting of place positively as inclusivity or with a healthy dose of skepticism as tokenism or as an established global industry of discovering native local informants for the expansion of Western audiences within a seemingly homogenizing globalization. A gain in popularity of the essay film, even as a still relatively obscure film methodology, has come to produce a paradox of what constitutes margin and center in film practice and where difference and comprehensibility of difference are both produced. The essay film must also confront its own inclusion in the sea of anonymous recycled compilations of pre-existing public images on YouTube which exponentially overlay margins and centers, the formulaic and the experimental, the local and the global (especially beyond the confinements of verbal language) on a truly massive quantifiable and commodifiable scale.

What differentiates this notion of the essayistic from earlier liberal democratic notions of the essay in civic or literary education and former culturally or politically marginalized counter-public practices is not only the essayistic’s apparent or supposed newer cooptation but the mass-

162 Elsaesser, “The Essay Film: From Film Festival Favorite to Flexible Commodity Form,” in Essays on the Essay Film, 252.
163 Ibid., 251-253.
165 Elsaesser, “The Essay Film: From Film Festival Favorite to Flexible Commodity Form,” in Essays on the Essay Film, 245.
scale production of difference. This massive production of difference in the sphere of cultural identity and identity politics could be said to operate on the display and discourse of racial, gendered, national, economic and sexual difference through homogenizing aesthetic or technological strategies. At times this hybridity can appear overly seamless and objectified. It can also focus our attention on the gaps where cultural and historical references, and languages clash at foundational levels. Instead of starting from one particular past or trajectory, we may benefit from histories of the essay film through histories by essay films themselves. While there may be a need to trace lineages of the essayistic through the strains of the mass reproduction of information, argumentation and storytelling, especially considering the influence of mass communication technologies, one could say that essay films start from their own present to resituate histories, especially exponentially mediated ones outside of any Western trajectories of inevitability. However, such present positions must confront the way in which the resituating of histories are caught up in homogeneous empty time.

If standardization demands idiosyncratic individualism or codification creates shifting and malleable collective identities, how does one tell a personal story? The solution essay films have often relied on is creating stories which argue for ambivalence or disclosures of complicity in the production of images which themselves contribute to the standardization of individuality in dynamic overlapping social worlds. Perhaps this ambivalence can also be codified, yet if forms of defamiliarization, subversion or ambivalence can be reduced to readily available techniques or methodologies, they can no longer be considered open-ended. Heteroglossia can be understood as multiple voices continually being embedded in overlapping mediascapes of ever-changing dynamic language formations and meanings. While voices continually

\footnote{Steyerl, “The Essay as Conformism? Some Notes on Global Image Economies,” in Essays on the Essay Film, 276.}
appropriating elements of discourse in opportune moments may remain a constant, methodologies towards such activities can lose their ability to contribute to knowledge formation if they are merely techniques of copying and pasting for recognizable sense formation. While the techniques of essay filmmaking may be reflective of new economic realities of commodifying the circulation of images by multiple overlapping publics and self-reflexive personalization can develop into borrowed tropes, even a trope of self-aware complicity, it could be that open argumentation can never be turned into a repeatable or verifiable method and in fact fails when it relies on or turns into a repetitious technique or method, or turns into a closed argument.
3 ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUAL FILMS

3.1 Inbetween Wonderland 1977

In some sense, sex films are like other cultural practices, in that they build off of the ruins of their own past. This can be done deliberately or unintentionally. We can individually and collectively build off these ruins. It can also occur to us that there is a limit to acting deliberately or unintentionally in how we build our present based on any given number of pasts that appear to have their own agencies. These agencies seem to overlay in fraught simultaneity, conflict and converge, conspire to cooperate, or tolerate one another. Sonic and visual recordings can act as partial and suspect evidence of past cultural practices that have become ruins which only leave traces of their former lives. We may seek to collect records of their past moments of presence.

This chapter will look at how cultural inheritance can be something which necessarily must be forgotten to be remembered. Specifically, I look at how the Golden Age of Porn is a convoluted notion of a recent past. In its basic definition, nostalgia is a process which is more a matter of perception than being factual or even interpretive of facts. Visual and sonic appearances recorded sometime in the past are perhaps the literal concreteness of a past which triggers nostalgia for factual evidence of a lost past. Yet this reintroduced (ephemeral) concrete presence involves foremost a perception of recorded pasts.

In this chapter, first, I give a visual synopsis of my video installation, Inbetween Wonderland 1977. Second, I introduce ways pornographic films from the past can be read more clearly as mediated due to their aesthetic and cultural appearance of historical difference due to specific recordings themselves having been neglected with overall general impressions remaining. Third, I discuss the relation of institutional legitimacy and historical pastness in relation to my video. Fourth, I discuss issues of legality and cultural legitimacy pornographic
films contended with in the 1970s. Fifth, I discuss contradictions in reading into social and political feminisms, genders and renegotiated sexualities of given pasts.

3.1.1 Visual Description of *Inbetween Wonderland 1977*

For my dual-screen video installation, *Inbetween Wonderland 1977* (2017), I compiled clips from eighty pornographic films from 1977, editing them to Klaus Schulze’s music score from Lasse Braun’s *Body Love* (1977). The films encompass a range of adult films from softcore exploitation films to sexually explicit hardcore features. Some are one-day wonders, or films shot in one day, and then developed, edited and exhibited within a week. Others had larger budgets. Some were shot and exhibited within a given locale, while others had larger distribution networks, and often exclusively produced for export including short minutes-long loops of sex acts and auteur feature-length narrative fictions. With rare exceptions, almost all of the films used are from the United States and northern and western Europe. Most films are what could be and usually is generously called “straight porn,” which usually (though not always) only excludes male-male sexual encounters. All were lifted from porntube websites specializing in vintage porn films uploaded by site members with the material sources of the films ranging from new digitally restored copies to cheap and dirty digitized copies of films ripped from possible multi-generation VHS bootleg copies of copies of copies in poor condition.

My installation was exhibited three times. It was first exhibited on one screen projected on a sheet in a women’s bathroom, and then, as figure 3.1 shows, on two black scrims at the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC) in Troy, NY. The third screening was at the Toronto International Porn Festival at the Super Wonder Gallery in Toronto, Canada.
In the dual-screen version, both screens start out with two to three seconds-long snippets of opening credits from various adult films.

Gradually the films become more cut up, going from establishing shots to shots of people in cars or friends walking somewhere till people start to take off their clothes. As the music speeds up to a frenzy, the clips become cut up into twelve to twenty-four different frames of clips per second as clips slowly focus in on genitalia on one screen and faces on the other opposing screen. This overall draw into crotches and faces can safely be said to be made up of discontinuous elements, that is, they do not present a causal sequence of actions, but rather
suggest movement through the gradual overlays of multiple elements weaving in and out to create an overall zooming in effect until the occurrence of a money shot on one screen and the face of an actor moving off camera into the great beyond on the other. At this point the screens which had been moving into divergent directions of crotches and faces suddenly show clips more or less two to five seconds in length with similar images of people mainly engaged in actions other than sexual intercourse until shots appear of people driving, walking, running or flying (presumably away) from what has taken place. What had once been exhilarating in the slow even steady increase in frenzied cuts becomes monotonous as clips stay long enough to focus on particular presences of action but not long enough to see their consequences. As soon as we are absorbed into an action, the edit moves on to another similar or juxtaposed action. In this way the second half mimics the patterning from the first frenzied half of the video, but now instead of attempting to lead us to a desperate edge of now seemingly pregnant with emotive meaning, we are stuck in a world that just goes on and on without saying a thing. The directions of action on the two screens appear to diverge again as an explosion occurs on one screen while a couple sails off into the sunset on the other. After I pieced the clips together according to Schulze’s score, the music was replaced with a variety of library music and dialogue lifted from sex films from 1977 for the final presentation.

There is much to this compilation that feels to be part of the present as it does of the past. The present is in the archival, editing and display tools I used (internetporn sites from which I amassed 235 feature narratives and a handful of short loop films from 1977; non-linear editing software; and video projectors, which were available and even used in exhibiting pornography at home, in semi-public spaces such as bars and in theaters in 1977 but were not yet ubiquitous).  

My exhibition of these formerly popular yet ostracized and almost exclusively and convolutedly male-oriented films occurred in a large-scale multi-million dollar art institution far away in time and social space from where they would have first been exhibited in 1977. The work is a kind of list making, a ubiquitous Internet practice of compiling the “best of (fill in blank),” or quick shots of film or video that are similar or offer juxtapositions which illustrate a point. In this way, *Inbetween Wonderland 1977* appears to only reinforce what the compiler capriciously most loves or charishes (even in the form of critical or ironic opposition). The images and image makers on display—the actors, the camera personnel, the directors, the producers, and the music scorers—may all appear innocent as displaced relics. They are images even if unseen themselves behind the seen ones. There exists the unavoidable impression that these presences from a past have all been thrown into a new context without their knowledge or consent or ability to foresee our present. Many are already dead or at least can be assumed to be lost to the lived world and in their own private lives (once again).

3.1.2 Neglect as Remembrance and the Parallel Time of Fantasy

The patina of time adds a dimension to a cultural perception of pornography as initially something that can put us at a precipice of uncontrollable emotive reaction to the immediate. This is to say, the reception of sexualized imagery as already passed potentially mediates (for better or worse) any desire for the immediate. While antipornographers of varying motivational stripes may claim pornography desensitizes us to imagery which could otherwise be safely and fittingly sexual rather than (hyper)sexualized, the experience of sexualized imagery as historical in ways such imagery may or may not have intended promises to bring such parallel worlds of given cultural fantasies into contextualizable hindsight. Far from desensitizing us through
overexposure, our experience of sexual imagery as temporally displaced phantoms from a given social sexuality can potentially alert us the mediation of the immediate in desire, including political desire. Sexual imagery can appear to “desensitize” us, not through a rampant exposure of transient media effects, but by giving us a perhaps dubious feeling of temporal distance of (re)discovery that pornography as an immediate experience is supposed to lack. Pornographic films may actually only be merely emblematic of a perception of film’s overall potential to disappoint us in presenting the world again and again as we may think we desire, loathe or ambivalently regard it.¹⁶⁸ My own compilation of sex films from 1977 cannot help but compel me to intuit that this temporal distance is what makes me feel anxiously assured in my ethical and aesthetic judgements concerning my own receptive perceiving as interpretive expression.

By cutting up these films I gave myself permission to develop a familiar contact with a kind of filmmaking I did not have familiar contact with before. In the beginnings of compiling adult films from 1977, I had not come to these films as an ongoing consumer of pornography nor as a connoisseur of it. This is not to say I had never seen any. I had sporadically seen them continuously throughout my life as a child, as a teenager and as an adult. Though not a pornographic film in any strict sense of showing sex acts, Peter Greenaway’s The Draughtsman’s Contract (1981) was perhaps the first so-called adult sex film I had seen when my mother took me with her because she wanted to see it and didn’t want to get a babysitter. My friends and I had seen Lizzie Borden’s Erotique (1994) in a movie when we were seventeen as a rite of passage. I had also seen Debbie Does Dallas (1978) and Caligula (1979) on video around the same time with other friends. In some sense I had already long since come to assume pornography was part of some sort of vaguely complex and politically fraught historical

continuum that had blossomed in a time right before I was born. But sex films themselves had never been something that was a continuous part of my everyday experience. I had not been habituated to the films themselves but rather to the film’s traces.

Since the 1970s attempts have continuously been made to bring sexually explicit material into public spaces with perhaps unforeseen consequences as public sexuality continuously contributes to political renegotiations of power in commerce, notions of autonomy and agency in socialized gender identity, regulations within both implicit cultural norms and explicit law, and fluctuating notions and divisions of public and private life. It has come to occupy a great deal of commercial public life as an explicitly named term in varying religious, aesthetic, national, academic, civic and legal contexts—and in advertisements, fashion, television, everyday speech and contemporary social media. It is discussed publicly as what is most secret, as the ubiquitous secret media experience.\(^{169}\)

The more specific appearance of references to aesthetic tropes of 1970s porn can create an uncanny fantasy about fantasies of years gone by which as a retrospective appearance takes on an evidential or documentary afterlife of former social sexual attitudes and appearances as the films themselves fade into ambient memory perhaps only ever literally seen by a limited number of men in porn theaters in the 1970s and by a larger number of mixed genders in their afterlife on home video and further viewed by aficionados as a special niche market in Internet porn. Hazy phantasmic knowledge about continuously referenced elements of 1970s porn: the mustache, bountiful pubic hair, funk and muzak sonic backdrops unrelated to or unsynchronized with displays of often mechanical sex acts runs adjacent to the disappearance of the films themselves from public presence into memory’s backdrop or lining. David Church suggests that paradoxically it is this very passive, i.e., neglectful, cultural forgetting (as opposed to active

forgetting through censorship), this continuous distracted forgetting that can assure adult films being remembered through revival by future unintended audiences interested in films whose ghostly presence forms a lining of social memory. Furthermore, marketable and profitable distracted forgetting can paradoxically contribute to this revival of adult films by creating their appeal via the very media formats that ostensibly killed off cinematic porn.

The political and aesthetic need for certain trajectories of life to passively forget these films can fuel their demand for recovery by aging and future unintended viewers who are not only invested in mere nostalgia, ironic interest or intentional disparity concerning these films but who can be absorbed by erotic pleasure in the past both despite and because of its separation from the present. This erotic pleasure can be experienced in seemingly outdated sexual mores including older forms of sexism along with older forms of combating it; in the appearance of antiquated sex slang whose references are unfamiliar yet easy to contextually decipher in a given film; or in the range and variety of specific movies which contradict certain notions of porn films: that they were made exclusively by sexual renegades or pioneers, or that they come from or contribute to a more sexually repressive culture, or that they constitute an origin point for new crass and/or liberating commercialized public sexual discourses, etc. This is perhaps not a matter of intentional disparity but pleasure in temporal disparity, a nevertheless politically dubious and conflicting pleasure concerning contested pasts and historical thinking. This convoluted temporal desire can be what creates the very real and very parallel world of a Golden Age which must always exist as a fantasy about time already gone by, a fantasy which seems to necessitate sacrificing historical context in order to process romantic authenticity as more real. It must paradoxically also be part of a set of contextualizable origin stories to diachronically explain a current state of assumed decay or downfall.

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170 Church, *Disposable Passions*, 3-4.
If one thing can be said of stories, it is that they kill time, especially when we doubt whether or not we can lay the claim that they are in essence “time killers.” We may think over whether a particular story purported to be fact really is, battling with our doubt of its logical plausibility, our supplementary factual knowledge, the story’s suspect adherence to storyline clichés, coming to no final conclusion, and in fact killing time beyond the scope of the story itself. We match up stories to other stories in attempts at pattern recognition. In thinking about it we have killed more time. Then another story comes along, only now we perceive that we are the producer rather than analyzer of it, killing more time, making it pass. The strange feeling comes that this killing of time is done through an occupying of it. Yet, this matter of the story, it’s content as an essence, cannot necessarily be perceived negatively as a destroyer of time, embodying death, but as a marker of time keeping death at bay.

Mikhail Bakhtin saw a certain killing of time in ancient Greek Romances, not far from what could be seen in many hardcore narrative films or the beginnings of mass-produced erotica in the late nineteenth century Victorian era. In analyzing Greek Romances, Bakhtin was concerned about the chronotope, “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.” One way he looked at chronotopes was through Greek Romances and their (fictional) characters, where, as “heroes,” the protagonists of these romances are heroes of chance and therefore passive heroes if you will, where “even love is unexpectedly sent to them by all powerful Eros.”¹⁷¹ Regardless of specific verifiable historical accuracy or justifiable analysis, Bakhtin appears to be implicitly creating a literary past of origins for pulp novels of recent industrial origin.

Bakhtin states that the one defining feature of these novels of antiquity is that any given one of them is an “extratemporal hiatus” that exists “between two moments of biographical

¹⁷¹ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 95.
time”—the sudden flare up of passion and that of a successful union. This hiatus “introduces nothing” into the lives of the heroes. 172 “In this kind of time,” Bakhtin claims, “nothing changes: the world remains as it was, the biographical life of the heroes does not change, their feelings do not change, people do not even age. This empty time leaves no traces anywhere, no indications of its passing.” 173 If all the trials and tribulations were to actually occur in the biographical time of these adventurous lovers, they would actually grow old with the experiences of their adventures. The delay of union would have “a certain biographical or at least psychological significance” to the lives of the lovers. 174 However, in this time out of time of these ancient novels, pure chance imperatively interrupts the normal course of events. The Greek Romance, for Bakhtin, is dependent on this interruption of one assumed plot of events in order for its pattern of inconsequential or non-dimensional time to emerge. Such interruptions are the deus ex machina that does not come out of thin air to resolve a conflict, but to create one. It enters as a hiatus from biographical time in the form of “just at that moment,” or “suddenly” which often leads to traveling to some other place. 175

For Bakhtin, such hiatuses within Greek romances can appear to exoticize places since they are constructed by a “technical, abstract connection between space and time,” where everything in it is foreign, an alien world. If one were to depict one’s own world, there is an unavoidable level of “indigenous reality” which could never reach the level of abstraction that the spaces of adventure time in Greek romances achieve. However, such depictions in these adventure times, these hiatuses, according to Bakhtin, are not exoticized. 176 An alien world presupposes a familiar one, one that assumes embeddedness. Yet, these ancient novels for

172 Ibid., 89-90.
173 Ibid., 91.
174 Ibid.
175 Ibid.
176 Ibid., 101.
Bakhtin do not “suppose a deliberate opposition of what is alien to what is one’s own,” what is one’s own familiar world. In the hiatuses of these ancient stories everything lacks indigenous reality, including the hero’s own homeland. What might be counted as having familiarity is abstracted and outside of biographical time or any kind of maturation process, becoming mere curious fact rather than providing indications of social and political structures with specific cultures and histories. This, I might add, does not necessarily deny our ability to see or read such cultural and historical structures within such parallel worlds. Escapism can reflect a certain kind of realism including a familiarity with the complicity between audience and producer in experiencing, reproducing and renegotiating sexual fantasy within given political structures that escapism at times appears to attempt to avoid, critique, mock, identify with or overcompensate for.

Bakhtin’s notion that the hiatus within adventure novels cannot be strictly considered exoticism may be debatable. Yet, it does offer a way to see the ways in which exoticisms that assume an unfamiliar and mysterious yet experienceable “other” contra a familiar experiencing self depend on the inconsequential temporality of adventure stories. The name of my film, *Inbetween Wonderland 1977*, can certainly conjure up images of escapism. It can easily refer to foreign lands as a source of revitalization from the drudgery of one’s specific, i.e., local and familiar, modern life. It can invoke the image of early twentieth century penny arcades as exhibition spaces of revitalizing distraction out of which film in general and porno films in particular arose. It can alert one to the recycling and repurposing of single viewer machines for 7-minute-long porno loops, which had gone into disuse in the 1940s as ways to watch cartoons. It can conjure up an image of the carnivalesque atmosphere of neighborhoods in Western cultures such as Times Square which catered to local sex tourism. It also refers to general

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177 Ibid.
imaginative dreamscapes as beyond everyday experience out of which the various historical evocations above depend. Yet, “wonderland” as we can see can appear as an outdated notion. It can conjure up images of an older mind frame supposedly having fallen out of favor and lacking a politically self-awareness, does not match up to an assumed teleological progressiveness which as a goal has already come to pass. In referring to an historically shaped escapism, “wonderland” as an inconsequential time out of time which treats everything as a curiosity is certainly not inconsequential. Perhaps it is this way of thinking about “wonderland” which can treat it with self-aware consideration which is neither overly moralizing nor merely aestheticizing but rather can treat mediascapes of wonder more ambivalently as fantasy.

It is safe for me to say that lazily thinking of the Golden Age as a regressive primordial place of inconsequential time out of biographical time has allowed me to see the historical traces inscribed within the films I visit. By editing them together in rhythmic and mechanical overlays, I could amalgamate all the different places in their various filmic states: master digital restoration, degeneration through excessive video copying and digital compression. An establishing shot of a small German town saturated in color could coexist with a fuzzy VHS rip of a generically international hotel lobby. This shot can sit next to a greyed-out shot of the old JFK airport terminal, before the appearance of Park Avenue in New York. This can be followed by a scene in a San Francisco bar and a woman riding a bicycle amidst inclining palm trees, while a trucker fixes his rig along a highway somewhere in the US. Places can appear as all equally a potential wonderland setting till the characters start to take over in prominence, becoming themselves interchangeable encounters of zooming in. By being treated as images which can be encapsulated within a singular contained timeline of building up and meandering, individual wonderlands can appear as equally inscribed past times running parallel with each
other and with present lived time. People, places, things and actions can be seen as fixed
presences of the past, as flashing curiosities that can confound and elucidate our awareness of
historical change. By being hyperedited the films can also remain as fragments of cultural
memory that can never be fully integrated into lived time but appear to exist in a forever parallel
wonderland.

While “killing time” is a standard claim concerning pornography or sexually explicit
material as a reading or viewing experience in a wide variety of media since the presence of
“pornography” as something that “names an argument, not a thing,” or as something intrinsically
tied to mass-media production, one may also say that “fans of Golden Age pornographic
features” can be “concerned with finding more nuanced sources of pleasure than mere autoerotic
affect, less out of being ‘desensitized’ (a still-popular term among anti-porn moralists for
connoting moral and political apathy) than habituated to the genre’s narrative conventions, as
long-time fans of any genre eventually are.”178 In this, pornography can indeed become a thing
as a cultural practice which can be evaluated from within its form, rather than as a purely
argumentative category of either good or bad, socially redeemable or crudely misogynistic, self-
reflexive or unambiguously exoticizing, etc. For the long-time viewer or reader of any number
of time killers, or for encyclopedic collectors of stories, there can indeed be a maturation process
with viewing or reading any number of time killers, time killers we may assume to automatically
take on a merely repetitious visceral quality of an ahistorical media effect hiatus or flight out of
time for any number of enthusiasts, devotees, or even critics or detractors who devote time to
such chronotopic hiatuses. Paradoxically, one can become aware of the historical
transformation, i.e., the maturation or development process, which pornographic films with their

178 Walter Kendrick, The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture (New York: Viking, 1987), 31 and
Church, Disposable Passions, 156.
often “technical or mechanical connections between space and time,” do not supposedly have within their own specific storyline narratives.

Yet, perhaps it is not alienized worlds devoid of indigenous reality within narratives that create inconsequential experience, but rather involves another configuration. Perhaps it is the experience of multiplicity in ever changing publics and their dependency on transient given indigenous realities which contributes to the alien world effect within revisited narratives. In the context of cultural and technological change, indigenous reality can become mere ephemeral appearance rather than a lost yet somehow enduring inheritance it is supposed to be. Both the passive neglect of specific sex films and the changing as well as repetitious varieties of specific nuances in discourses about the social sexual worlds sex films come out of at given moments may be what contributes to the sense of inconsequential time out of time within pornography as a genre or form. Discourses on social sexual worlds can be contingent on given ephemeral moments of sexual mores and/or anxieties for their reception, in turn producing their archival effect. The informal archival storage and media migration of sex films through bootlegging, i.e., the duplication or time-shifting and sharing of media that is not readily available commercially, can be what makes this transience in communication sonically and visibly perceivable.¹⁷⁹ Informality in cultural preservation can alert us to the paradoxical ephemerality or spectacle of institutional or institutionalizable discourses by such informal preservation’s examining of recorded documents through appropriated revisitation.

3.1.3 Institutional Legitimacy and Historical Pastness

*Inbetween Wonderland 1977* appears to me as an attempt that was not wholly conscious beforehand in trying to understand this conundrum of the sublimation of what had once occupied social, medial and political spaces antithetical to the art institution in which I had exhibited my video installation. There are convoluted and interdependent legitimacies and illegitimacies that *Inbetween Wonderland 1977* both relies on and enforces in its compilation of pornographic films from 1977. Legitimacy and its relational opposite refers here to the degree of acceptability of something by implicit and explicit rules within governmental and organizational institutions, as well as within small-scale or (counter)public communities. My proposal for the installation had been approved by a non-curatorial committee at EMPAC to exhibit an installation of films from 1977 which have been marketed, exhibited in theaters, sold for home viewing and made available online as “pornographic.” The installation had also been approved by an academic committee as a topic or field of study for this very dissertation.

This in itself is not too remarkable. There has always existed a relation between academic institutions and adult film. What is known as porn studies has come to be an academic field encompassing film, gender, queer and cultural studies. It was the subject of early 1980s BDSM porn editor Brian O’Hara’s senior thesis *Psycho Wimp* (1980) which parodies a feel good academic discussion with undergraduates in a class on “The Philosophy of Pornography.” Exploitation film scholar, Eric Schaefer claims that porn had largely been kept out of academia as film studies (especially male-dominate auteur theory) had grown as a scholarly industry in the 1960s at the moment subterranean male-oriented pornographic film was gaining a wider cross-gender social viewership. However, pornography was not far from the experience of people formally being trained in film production and reception as working on sex films has long since

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been a means by which film students have come to gain industry experience. Sex films have also become the means by which male (and some female) filmmakers were able to become “auteurs” themselves. Well-known sex filmmakers Radley Metzger and Bob Chinn had both been film students of Hans Richter and Josef von Sternberg, respectively. 

My work in a sense was able to exist within a space which merely sheltered and covered the sexual content therein by offering an exhibition space. I was told that I could not announce or advertise on EMPAC’s website that the exhibition contained sexually explicit material as it was per their policy in general not to advertise exhibitions as involving nudity or sexual content. I advertised the exhibition as, “a multi-projection screen audio visual collage of over fifty, mainly low-budget, fictional narrative films from the filmmaker’s birth year, 1977.” I was also told by the committee that any objection that might be raised by the school administration through word-of-mouth alerting to them of the exhibition would fall on me.

However possible such a crackdown or objection to the work could have taken place (and it did not take place), my own sincere assumption (however questionable it may be) was that the films were already unavoidably and uncontrollably legitimated by temporal disparity. This is to say that their historical distance already gave them an automatic social and historical redeeming value, a hindsight inaccessible to the films themselves. Such a value seemed inescapable and pregiven not due to the legitimacy or cover the university and art institution had allowed the exhibition of Inbetween Wonderland 1977 through school grant funding but due to the ability of the fiction films to become suggestive of documentary evidence of their inability to know their own future or the institutional context in which they could possibly be shown in. Furthermore, issues surrounding assumed, faked and authentic copyright that were endemic to adult films in 1977 rather than explicit sexual content can be said to be more of an issue as regards to the

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legitimate contemporary exhibition of my video work, as the copyright of adult films existed in grey areas of local, national and transnational legality, and frequent though not exclusive funding by organized crime.

3.1.4 Legality and Cultural Legitimacy in the 1970s

Histories about or concerning pornography in the 1970s have continuously favored teleological trajectories towards evermore explicitness in showing genitalia as if such explicitness was predetermined or always there as the motivation in adult cinema. Many narratives about the rise of hardcore adult feature films describe the evolution of sexploitation films from mix-gendered “nudie-cuties” to nude male and female models to simulated sex films competing with cheaper non-narrative and legally prosecuted three to seven minute-long film loops in which first genitalia was shown leading to explicit depictions of sex, usually purchased in brown paper bags or seen on single-user film-viewers in adult bookstores. These bookstores could be found in low-end or down market commercial centers in reputedly libertine cities. Such centers include Times Square in New York or the Tenderloin in San Francisco. Such trajectories depend on and neglect nuanced legal, economic, technological and political complexities. Within limited urban markets in the 1970s, especially in New York, San Francisco

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These “peep machines” were at first modified vintage single-user film viewers used in the 1940s-50s for various reasons including the exhibition of stripteases based off of single-user machines from arcades and fairgrounds in the late 19th and early 20th century, which also exhibited variations on the theme of women removing clothing. See Alilunas, Little Smutty Movies, 42-50, and the Rialto Report’s podcast of an interview with Marty Hodas, the inventor of the New York peep machine: “Marty Hodas: King of the Peeps,” http://www.therialtoreport.com/2014/06/29/marty-hodas-king-of-the-peeps-podcast-38/ See also, “Automated Vending: Cleveland 1973,” in McNeil and Jennifer Osborne, The Other Hollywood: The Uncensored Oral History of the Porn Film Industry, 104-110, about another famous peep booth inventor, Reuben Sturman.
and increasingly in Los Angeles, the marketing of pornography could help the cottage industry thrive, given certain ecological conditions of media and economic scale.

Meanwhile, a strategy stemming from US postwar depictions of sex as clinical sex education such as the exploitation hit, *Mom and Dad* (1945), coded convincingly as a sincere form of sex hygiene education, continued in less and less coded ways to show sex and genitalia through the pretense of medical and social scientific respectability in the form of pseudo-documentaries. Such documentaries include *Pornography in Denmark* (1970) (as a cultural or anthropological study of a nation which had just decriminalized pornographic films) and *A History of the Blue Movie* (1970) (as a history of the stag film from 1915 to 1970). Both films along with other pseudo-documentaries contained nonsimulated explicit sex acts as the ruse for explicit documentary evidence of the documentaries’s redeeming value required by legal framings in the loosening of obscenity laws.\(^{184}\) Eventually, federal obscenity laws, specifically in the United States, became lax, switching to notions of “local community standards” for prosecuting films for their lack of “redeeming social value.”\(^{185}\)

Since the ruling of *Miller v. California* in 1973 on outlawing federally-based obscenity, handing such determinations of obscenity to local jurisdictions and “local community standards,” sexually explicit films could then in theory be shown in public theaters in the United States but were in reality limited to areas which chose not to prosecute, effectively creating a given city, town or state’s local indigenous community standards from on high by local officials. This simultaneous loosening and tightening of censorship laws follows the legalization and regulation of sexually explicit films in Europe, the legal product of the pornographic filmmaker, producer

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\(^{184}\) McNeil and Jennifer Osborne, *The Other Hollywood: The Uncensored Oral History of the Porn Film History*, 52.

and anti-censorship activist, Lasse Braun, whose film soundtrack I used to structure my compilation video installation.

However much there may have been a sincere politics involved in regards to censorship of gay and straight sexually explicit films before the ruling, the new potential legality—or rather unpredictable and capricious (lack of) prosecution—of such material created new issues for filmmakers to consider as to what went into their films. Many pornographic films from 1977 which I use in Inbetween Wonderland 1977 are reflective of this change in practice due to the change in the laws. While before 1973 narrative and aesthetics were used partially as a tactic for getting around censorship by providing recognizable or culturally coded plot-driven reasons and pretensions of artistic or scientific value to films, storylines and artistic craft were also used in order to compete with market demand for story and quality that was being provided by sexually simulated softcore and sexploitation genres which were much more violent in their sexual depictions especially towards women. At the same time softcore began to feel market pressure to provide nonsimulated sexual material, creating a huge crossover between the two subgenres of film that became pervasive in the industry in 1977.186 

Yet, it can be argued that such pretenses of artistic or scientific value as pretenses are what gives these films their retrospective socio-historical “literary, artistic, political or scientific redeeming value” required by the Miller v. California ruling only long after they were publicly and visibly present, only after they had been forgotten by a given public at large. The fact that many sexually explicit films in the United States acknowledged legal framings by skirting around them give them their documentary value as cultural records of responses to legal form.

By way of comparison, *pornochanchadas* in Brazil also can be said to speak about the political contentions between law and cultural reception. *Pornochanchadas* or “porn comedies” in Brazil were a cottage film industry permitted during the 1964-85 dictatorship as a means of protecting the country’s domestic film market against the ubiquitous imported adult films from the United States.\textsuperscript{187} Political class divisions can be seen between the overt politics of Cinema Novo along with other middle-class avant-garde political dissidents in film and the *pornochanchadas* of Boca do Lixo (the Mouth of Garbage), a poor neighborhood of São Paulo. Many Cinema Novo filmmakers had been censored, losing their jobs as professors and academics, while *pornochanchadas* made in a favela known for its nightclubs, sex workers and exploitation films thrived creating a self-produced or self-financed film industry with untrained cast and crew as it was compliant with the Brazilian dictatorship’s censor board even while *pornochanchadas* often portrayed politicians as cartoonishly hypocritical buffoons. In addition, overtly oppositional Marxist directors from the middle class engaged in the seemingly legitimated genre. Director, Joaquim Pedro de Andrade’s, *Vereda Tropical* (1977) is the story of a man who has sex with a watermelon in the omnibus film *Erotic Tales* (1977) based on short stories from a *Playboy* fiction-writing contest. This practice allowed de Andrade to both critique *pornochanchadas* themselves and to merely make films by working in the permitted genre, appearing to have given into filmic expectations. Yet, the film, devoid of any explicit hetero- or homosexual acts or nudity, was nevertheless banned by the censor board.\textsuperscript{188} While one can deride *pornochanchadas* as fitting with sexist, misogynist, racist, homophobic stereotypes and

\textsuperscript{187} Concerning Li Han-hsiang’s films see, Yau Ching, “Porn Power: Sexual and Gender Politics in Li Han-hsiang’s Fengyue Films,” in *As Normal As Possible: Negotiating Sexuality and Gender in Mainland China and Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 113-131. Also, for a reading of intra-European or intra-Western anxieties and “Orientalist gazing” or “othering” of Scandinavia’s legalization and regulation of sexually explicit material, including film, see Nikolas Glover and Carl Marklund, “Arabian nights in the midnight sun? Exploring the temporal structure of sexual geographies,” *Historisk Tidskrift* 129, no. 3 (2009): 487-510.

existing as a pure form of escapism, Melissa Schneider argues that *pornochanchadas* can also be seen as a form of aesthetic expression of sexual and political complicity created by segments of the underclass and urban working poor.\(^{189}\) Like twentieth century Times Square, *Buca do Lixo* produced its own film industry centered on its own aesthetic sensibilities and a popular underclass’ own well-established disreputation with a supposedly safe and high-minded middle class.

In addition to films being examples of skirting prosecution or complying with censorship (or both at the same time) in a grey limbo land of legality, pornographic films in the United States and elsewhere began to appear with copyright dates in the mid-1970s. This was often done in the US regardless of formal copyright registration at the Library of Congress as the Copyright Act of 1976 allowed for protection if copyright dates had been burned with a film’s credits though the new law could not protect against copyright infringement for films that had not been formally registered, a legal process most adult films were afraid of going through for fear of legal prosecution.\(^{190}\) Moreover, in the video era, distributors constantly battled over and contested copyright ownership and licensing as many unregistered copyright owners could not wholly verify ownership when seeking to distribute older films in video.\(^{191}\) It is the property regime of copyright and theatrical release, i.e., the partial capital legitimacy and regulation of narrative hardcore which had already gained a standardization by 1977 that allowed for my retrospective search for such films in the first place. Perhaps I could have included more silent short loop films which were usually around seven minutes-long, cut from longer durations of


\(^{190}\) Church, *Disposable Passions*, 112.

\(^{191}\) Ibid., 113.
filming, often featured sex acts with unplanned or loosely improvised scenarios with anonymous performers and usually carried no copyright date. By being part of a property regime, narrative hardcore was not only the result of its growing legality and public presence, but can perhaps be used more rigorously as historical records in ways other than as documentation of their pseudo-documentation. Eric Schaefer suggests that being loosely scripted, pornographic films can provide a window into larger sexual and linguistic practices of a culture at any given time, especially making visible what a given culture at a given time most vilifies. Schaefer further claims that adult films follow their own aesthetic conventions of shock and clinical education which appear to favor abstract relations to space and time over the spatial and temporal coherence and continuity of most conventional Hollywood films. These inherited aesthetics can be seen even as adult films from the 1970s drew on plot, storyline and dramatic action. This perhaps can be seen in explicit sex scenes which use “inserts,” or sex acts recorded elsewhere with other actors. They perhaps can also appear to offer more straightforward forms of documentation. Schaefer suggests that by often being shot on location and especially being shot without permission, they can document rapidly changing public spaces in ways unavailable to other fiction films working under more rigidly and tightly controlled set ups. Like news footage meant or intended to document present events in a given real world for an in-the-moment public, pornographic films document a present in their fictional narratives. By often being shot on the fly within private homes or hotels, they can be said to provide more accurate documentary disclosures concerning domestic interiors than films

192 Ibid., 133.
195 Ibid.,
196 Ibid., 91.
which were, often because of their larger budgets, able to control the staging, and therefore the historical appearance, of their films.\textsuperscript{197}

Yet in collecting such appearances for their retrospectively documentary and therefore assumed unintentional historically redeeming value as artifacts preserved in light and sound, one can become aware that such artifacts should not have to be objectified as artifacts of themselves to be the ruins upon which we build our present of a past. Such ruins can be part of the given world in which we find ourselves. However, the current presence of new slick and sanitized gentlemen’s clubs in Times Square glosses over the large scale real estate speculation that both wiped away and profited from the past presence of the frequently violent local built environs in which porno films and theaters as well as other aspects of cottage sex industries and non-commercial sex cultures once thrived. These past sex cultures themselves in turn had once taken over theaters which had once been part of the vertical integration of mass large-scale film production and distribution systems that had gone into disarray in the 1960s-70s as Hollywood was no longer able to financially sustain a monolithic one-size-fits all film industry allowing for European, exploitation, adult film and other niche film markets to thrive. Embodied knowledge can certainly be a means by which we can focus on what we epistemologically can be sure of. However, the continual creative destruction of our given environs especially for profiting off that environs’ past in which people themselves are continuously mobile and nimble seems to demand documentary evidence of continuous and discontinuous pasts for cognitive reference as well as (conflicting) emotional understanding.

As much as adult films could be said to be more straightforward documentary disclosures on the past through their lack of moneyed aesthetic control or because they can inadvertently record the indigenous reality of their own disappearing worlds, this does not negate

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid.
their ability to be self-reflective and engage in metanarratives or themes. Many hardcore films have dealt with themes, often in a deliberately opportunistic way as exploitation films operating under the Hays Code had historically and traditionally always done. Such themes include sex and suicide as in Gerhard Domiano’s interpretation of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit, The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973), debt and black market economies in *Lustful Feelings* (1977), the erotics of religious hypocrisy in *Sylvia* (1977), anxieties and taboos surrounding interracial sex in *Behind the Green Door* (1972) and *Sex World* (1978), or gendered social roles and feminism, *Emanuelle Around the World* (1977)—themes that were then also folding into the post-Hays Code era of New Hollywood. In some ways, since much of hardcore has its origins in exploitation films, i.e., films—often as a market strategy—which approached topics considered taboo by Hollywood studios forced to operate under the Hays Code, the degree as to whether such themes are exploited for commercial gain or as conscious political messaging is often intentionally ambiguous and debatable from film to film. Many pornographic films are intentionally mimetic of Hollywood such as in the well-known sub-genre of porn parody and in even more straight forward adoptions of famous films by porn filmmakers, such as Bob Chinn’s Johnny Wadd film series with porn star, John Holmes, as the San Franciscan private detective, Sam Spade, especially in Chinn’s two remakes of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)—*The Jade Pussycat* (1977) and *The China Doll* (1977)—as well as *Eruption* (1977), a porn version of *Double Indemnity* (1944). Often films in the late 1970s and early 1980s were made from eighteenth century libertine texts and nineteenth century Victorian erotica, such as Phil Prince’s *Kneel Before Me* (1983), Sharon McKnight’s *Autobiography of a Flea* (1976) and Robert Sickinger’s *The Naughty Victorians: An Erotic Tale of a Maiden’s Revenge* (1975).
Often, especially in (all-male) gay porn films, adult films adopt ethno-fictive strategies beyond the law-skirting pseudo-documentary of the early 1970s. Such films include *New York City Inferno* (1978) which uses a French sex tourist travelogue of gay cruising spots in New York City—the meatpacking district, the dilapidated Chelsea piers and a sex club used in the film’s final orgy scene. *Muscle Bound* (1979) was filmed on site at a New York bathhouse, adding a voiceover narrative to the apparent semi-scripted actions of wandering from room to room and sex act to sex act. Other gay films utilize non-legalistic mockumentary forms of critique on ethnography such as *Boys from Riverside Drive* (1977) which references actual long-standing cruising spots and neighborhoods in which gay men had historically lived in.

In being authentically and bogusly copyrighted and with less large-scale institutional control despite pornography’s ongoing earnest mimesis and mockery of Hollywood films, hardcore features from 1977 can be said to provide instances of recorded displaced anachronistic appearances concerning multiple idiosyncratic sexual pasts just as the genre was entering into and contributing significantly to newer technological norms and tools which are often read as replacing theatrical cinematic pornography.\(^{198}\) Co-emerging with adult film’s legitimacy, especially in public places, video was slowly creeping in as a replacement for the cinematic or theatre exhibition or consumption of moving images, a technological change in which pornographic films can be seen as playing a crucial leading role as audiovisual material for private consumption. According to Peter Alilunas, for video historians, 1977 has become seen as “the breakout year” for the video rental business model started by George Atkinson when he placed an ad for video rentals in the *Los Angeles Times* on December 7, 1977. Yet, according to Alilunas, before Atkinson’s advertisement in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1977 for video rentals of all sorts of films, the entrepreneur was renting adult films on cassette formats (including U-Matic

\(^{198}\) Alilunas, *Smutty Little Movies*, 42.
and Magi-Cartridges) and renting or selling Technicolor projectors in various shadow economies engaged in adult entertainment such as media pirates, bar owners and hotel managers already part of theatrical adult film exhibition practices and distribution networks. Video projection can be seen as a mere replacement for film projectors in public spaces for pornographic consumption which continued in Times Square into the 1990s. In addition, video in the mid-1980s not only became the means of producing films cheaper and more efficiently. Video also became a means of recycling adult films from only ten years prior as “vintage.”

3.1.5 Political Exaggerations Concerning Public Sexuality

Yet even considering this technological invention of a Golden Age, whose Golden Age is this? Who claims or views it as their own historical fantasy? Who embraces it? Who disavows or condemns it? What are the current, past, continuous and developmental social paradoxes or contradictions that contribute to our political emotions, including our anxieties about dynamic cultural changes and political renegotiations around sex through time?

From one particular angle, to assume such a Golden Age is (either positively or negatively) exclusively one for men or for heterosexual patriarchal dominance faces many contradictions. A great number of adult films in (and since) the 1970s have continuously been thought by anti-pornography feminists as well as pro-pornography libertines to be intended for anonymous (and at one point in time urban and homosocial) masturbating male audiences as one manifestation, or even the manifestation of misogyny that must be preserved or outlawed. On the grounds of women’s civil rights Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin attempted to

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199 Alilunas, 48-50.
201 Church, Disposable Passions, 35.
outlaw pornography as a civil right for women in their alliance in the 1980s with Christian fundamentalist attempts at revamping the legal banning of sexually explicit material on the grounds of obscenity.\textsuperscript{202} While the trench coat crowd was certainly a dependable bread and butter market, the notion that pornography existed for purely misogynistic purposes and for misogynist audiences is undercut by various complications of gender, feminists working in the industry, film aesthetics, and changing middle class tastes and morals in consumer culture. The assumption that pornography is a strictly patriarchal heteronormative affair is contradicted by the inherent and inherited contradictions within homosocial spaces of so-called straight theaters. As Samuel Delany notes in his 30-year experience as a gay man cruising in theatrical spaces which showed sexually explicit materials with women as the apparent object of desire, much of the exhibition spaces were sexually mixed and had more male-on-male sexual contact than gay porn theaters.\textsuperscript{203} Furthermore, Delany points out that due to the fact that movies were shown over and over again, they tended to fade into the background of the space itself.\textsuperscript{204}

One can also see pornography as something in which feminism engaged with, whether varying factions engaged in sexually explicit art, condemned pornography as misogynist or condemned the condemning. The trope of misogyny exists in spite of wider vocal public interest in such films by celebrity tastemakers and women in the time of “porno chic” in the early 1970s when federal obscenity laws changed in the United States and Europe. This notion is also contradicted by the earlier appearance of sexually explicit experimental feminist and queer avant-garde theater and cinema in the 1960s including Carolee Schneemann’s \textit{Fuses} (1967), Shigeko Kubota’s \textit{Vagina Painting} (1965), Andy Warhol’s \textit{Blow Job} (1963) and Paul

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{203} Delany, \textit{Time Square Red Time Square Blue}, 19.
\item \textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 18.
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Morrissey’s narrative-oriented film about hustling, *Flesh* (1968). In fact, despite feminist claims of inheritance to Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll* performance (1975) in which she read off a poem on paper she extracted from her vagina, Schneemann in 2001 has stated that *Fuses* in her opinion had been kept out of many feminist film histories.\textsuperscript{205} Though more famous for her antipornography campaigning and activism against violence towards women, Andrea Dworkin as a founding member of *Suck* magazine in the early 1970s had once endorsed oral sex as a realm of sexual liberation, including for children.\textsuperscript{206} In a contradictory way many sexual theatrical and cinematic practices by women and queer artists can take on redeeming social values due to their co-emergence with and political utilization by feminism and gay liberation in ways not available to supposedly hetero-male porn perceived as not sharing in the same needs of liberation or self-determination as women and queer cultures, which can selectively ignore homosexual practices in ostensibly heterosexual exhibition spaces as well as the existence of gay directors and actors who deliberately chose to work in the genre of straight porn and women directors, such as Roberta Findlay, who perceived their own films as unoriginal hack work.\textsuperscript{207} Political redemptions run parallel to the overwhelming share of the adult market by hetero-male material paradoxically consumed in male-exclusive spaces (both social and isolated, public, semi-public and private) throughout modern pornography’s history. A feminist redemption also runs parallel to the unintended ironic use of supposedly degrading porn as evidence of misogyny that anti-pornography feminists themselves repeatedly showed in anti-porn recruitment lectures and in the documentary, *Not a Love Story: A Film about Pornography* (1982). Around the same time, in 1979, female porn stars Annie Sprinkle, Marlene Willoughby and Gloria Leonard protested *Ms*

\textsuperscript{207} Delany, *Time Square Red Time Square Blue*, 1-108.
Magazine, condemning the magazine’s criticism of pornography, viewing the magazine as hypocritical, carrying signs saying, “Ms. exploits sex too.”

There are other aspects of the development of cinematic adult films that complicate both its vilification as well as its valorization as smut in ways related to wider public appeal and gender. The equation of the moniker X with sexually explicitness is complicated by the original invention of the label for movies by the institutional Motion Picture Association of America in the switch from the Hays Code to the ratings system with Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (winner of five academy awards) as its first film requiring adult supervision for anyone under age 18 before the ratings system was actually implemented and before the uncopyrighted “X” rating was completely appropriated by the non-MPAA adult film world in ways that made its use by the MPAA itself useless. A homosocial, ostensibly misogynist, shameful and cool/uncool subterranean framing of the heritage of the Golden Age is also complicated by attempts by some male directors and producers in the late 1970s to create sexually explicit material for women as an untapped profitable market, as a sincere political prerogative, and as a ruse for middle class sublimation and legitimacy (as a opposed to a subversive opposition to it) and as a means of access to careers in Hollywood.

In addition to contentions of gender, the Golden Age of Porn is further complicated by conceptions that pornography is strictly a Western invention or cultural construct imposed within and without contradictorily defined spheres of the West (and everything ambiguously in between). There is plenty of room to make the claim that, in the context of the 1970s, adult cinema was dominated by US American and northern and western European production and

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210 Alilunas, Smutty Little Movies, 80-81.
distribution networks within certain national and linguistic borders. Italian exploitation films in general were well-known for their voice overdubbing, allowing for easy export, including the many wholesale cheap production imitations of already existing prominent European erotica, art house and Hollywood films, such as the work of Joe D’Amato and Bruno Mattei.

There are porno cinema cultures and economies that were often segregated from this “Western sphere” of culture through a number of factors including assumed market demand and implicit nuanced reading between the lines specific to given cultures. Such cinema cultures include the Shaw Brothers studio productions in the 1970s, especially the exploitation films of prolific director of historical drama, Li Han-hsiang and fengyue pian, his own softcore pornography set in the late Ming Dynasty (e.g., Moods of Love, 1977 and Sensual Pleasures, 1978), and modern exploitation narratives (Crazy Sex, 1976). It also includes Japan’s domestic market pink films and roman porno market, often featuring “kinbaku-bi” bondage, and Brazilian pornochanchadas mentioned above.

Contentions concerning the Golden Age of Porn seem to show us the mixed bag of interrelated anxieties concerning cultural change, culture as a process of cultivation or naturalized conditioning. Contentions and contradictions can show us anxieties about our ability to control sexuality as an imaginative discourse in that processual cultivation. Anxieties concerning our personal political power to create our utopic vision of what sexuality should be perhaps cannot not be equivocated with repression. We may be highly vocal about such repression and in some contexts are forced to be vocal about it, right along with our anxieties and fears. Pseudo-clinical documentaries about sex from the early 1970s in the United States and pornochanchadas in Brazil may provide filmic evidence for the ways in which hegemonies of outright censorship form the rhetoric of such films or welcome local sexual transgressions in film
as bulwarks against US American domination in local or regional film markets. One may be able to see the ways in which antipornography feminism may rely on older patriarchal notions of female vulnerability against male libidos made rampant by sexual suggestive or explicit material, a notion held by many of the upper-class educated men who had first come to name, classify and control sexually explicit materials in the nineteenth century. Male pornographers, such as Alex De Renzy, may be against the legitimacy of pornography as the co-opting of sexually explicit material by a larger social acceptance of it. Divisiveness concerning sexual behavior can be the displacement of social anxieties with our added emotional intensities. Such anxieties can come with conscious political deliberation and in complete obliviousness (and sometimes all at once), often turning sexual behavior and representation into an overtly and even exaggerated political discourse. Consequently, as Gayle Rubin points out, “in such periods, the domain of erotic life is, in effect, renegotiated.”

Nostalgia does not necessarily merely desire a past that was never directly experienced as being better than a given present. Sometimes one shuns in horror at a relic from a given past as reprehensible and may indeed find redeeming social significance in this historically perceived reprehensibility. Sometimes this comes from an inability to read between the lines or frame how something might be read or understood under given cultural codes at the time of creation in words, phrases and images which stay semantically in the film but change discursively in their reception. Mark Rappaport’s Color Me Lavender argues for acknowledging the complexity of intergenerational readings of past popular institutional media, particularly post-Stonewall readings of pre-Stonewall films both before and during the Hays Code. Rappaport suggests that

211 Kendrick, The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture, 12.
what appears as straight-world-enforcing machismo in John Wayne and the repeated “laugh at the sissy” drag performances of Bob Hope in his buddy movies with Bing Crosby could very well be not just unconscious expressions of homosexuality repressed by the explicit and implicit codes of Hollywood but could quite possibly be a partial knowing reading between the lines by audiences of the time, something that one can read one’s own desires into as well receive as consciously intended by the films themselves. *Color Me Lavender* questions if it is possible that our gap in time and notion of progressive liberating change unavoidably colors how we read sexuality in past films.

While my video, *Inbetween Wonderland 1977*, seeks to ask similar questions of intergenerational readings of implicit codings, it does not offer up an explicit thesis either in words or in obvious choices of edits. It is not meant to put the viewer in an analytical mode of viewing but rather attempts to address reading the past through ambiguous emotional suggestion. Whether one views change along an axis of assumed progress or along the assumption that change *ought* to be progressive, paying attention to renegotiations that seem to affect our value judgements on past cultural records as better or worse than the present can help us see the elasticity of dominance that not only has existed in the past but continues to encompass wide ranges of contradictions in order to maintain and reproduce such dominance including assumed sexual enlightenment or decay based on assumed trajectories of time. Renegotiations in intentional disparity perhaps do not inherently distort an authentic historically contextual reading of a given recording. However, self-reflexive skepticism regarding our ability to judge or evaluate past implied meanings can inform our descriptions of past renegotiations, helping to prevent us in our prescriptive notions from dubiously forming an assumed descriptive progressive or regressive trajectory of time.
3.2  *Without Sky: The Tale of the Grey Cardinal*

Essay films and remix as defamiliarizing narrative and media methods can be seen as having become familiar through habitualizations which have been brought about by their popularity (even relatively obscure popularity as in the case of essay films) as well as their often explicit incorporation into powerful media institutions and norms shaped by publics coming more into the fold of image, sound and verbal production. Both approaches have partial roots in critical avant-garde aesthetic and political associations, especially in Marxist alliances and the New Left such as the Left Bank Cinema of Chris Marker and Alan Rias as well as in Latin American Third Cinema. Remix, as we have seen has roots in Situationist collage, tactical and populist media, consumer culture and establish media institutions.

Avant-garde art practices associated with Leftist politics in the 1960s have been noted for the way they have been incorporated into capitalist production.  

214 This can be seen not only in aesthetic techniques of appropriation, *detournement* and montage in the visual arts and films, or the ungrounded and shape-shifting subject in literature. It can be seen in aesthetic strategies as well, where “the search for authenticity, the ideal of self-management, the anti-hierarchical exigency, are now used in order to promote the conditions required by the current mode of capitalist regulation.”

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One can see familiarity as part of an economic process which must continually change and incorporate practices that critique such a process as part of a larger familiar process of creative destruction which must continually change forms of production and consumption in


order to vitalize and maintain itself. As Steyerl points out about essay films nowadays, sometimes the approaches and features of critical, marginal or oppositional media tactics can begin to uncannily appear as merely reflective of current economic practices of copy and paste reproductions of already-existing ideologies and rhetoric forms. Such reproductions can produce malleable codifications of difference rather than rigorous or fixed standardizations. One can see approaches to media art meant to defamiliarize the recycling of imagery begin to appear in political media publics which adapt defamiliarizing rhetorical forms while, perhaps unintentionally, inverting such defamiliarization’s political intent since such techniques have been so thoroughly familiarized as mere technique or applied methodology.

This chapter will look at how features of the essay film such as self-reflexiveness, irony, and meta-commentary on media circulation can become politically inverted from ostensibly Leftist origins. I will attempt to show how the informality of performative memory for purposes of political control has been used by Vladislav Surkov, a Russian politician experienced with late and post-Soviet avant-garde rhetoric and familiar with western theories of postmodern relativism both made popular beginning in the late 1970s. This will be done by looking at how my adaption of a science-fiction story allegedly written by Surkov both illustrates and ambiguously defamiliarizes his own ambiguous self-disclosure of media tactics. I will look at how chance and randomness in my video can act as a counterweight to a cynical or hopeless sense of loss of reality audiovisual media has seemingly helped exacerbate.
3.2.1 **Background of “Without Sky”**

It may be true that essay films attempt to open up audiences to a shared sense of self-doubt as to certitude in political convictions. They often desire to point to their own forced complicity in unsavory or at least compromising political conditions, disclosing forms of self-exploitation as Steyerl discusses in *November*, when she points out the expectations of filmmakers to be sensitive and understanding about global media images whose locality is almost impossible to communicate. Furthermore, such self-exposure can sometimes rely on forms of humorous irony by using images, sounds or verbal language that together appear to stylize arrogance or self-appointed objectivity as in Chris Marker’s *Letters From Siberia* with the film’s authoritative narrator taking on the voice over mannerisms of a learned anthropologist’s travelogue. Sometimes essay films rely on a sincere frankness about contradictions in one’s own receptive media experience as Naeem Mohaiemen depicts in *United Red Army*, describing his own desire as a nine year-old to see his own favorite British television drama about espionage annoyingly interrupted by a real world airplane hijacking in Bangladesh, a hijacking which unwittingly sparked a failed coup in the newly independent nationstate. In essay filmmaking the outward political realm and the interior realm of the personal can become profoundly mixed.

Essay films can be said to investigate the labyrinth of traveling images and narratives with a fair degree of self-conscious reflexivity through presenting abstract personae or social roles, stylized critical analysis or personal memories. This can create the doubled expectation of self-doubt concerning political certainty; that is to say, essay films can appear to reveal a political truism that the only certainty concerning the mass global semi-anonymous flow of media communication is uncertainty and that the seemingly humble artist is as caught up in such a flow’s uncertainty as are the nebulous and vaguely imagined anonymous audiences within
mediascapes. Essay filmmakers as a perhaps unstable social class with specific economic roles to play as well as create must confront new complexities in demands for critical autonomy, not just as trained professionals in advertising or capitalist production but in enlarging public spheres of open media production and circulation in the development of decentralization from earlier public access television to contemporary social media.

The question arises whether the expression of uncertainty within essay films and without is based on a right, chance or opportunity. Can this expression rely as much on the anonymity of being a human voice as it can rely on an authorship of one? And does this voice need to be singular and individual, even if only as a matter of form? If Bakhtin’s heteroglossia can take social interconnectedness as a given in the production of voice, how does one understand position, intention, or specific context within decentralized media practices?

In his well-known 1935 essay on the artwork in the age of mechanical reproduction, Walter Benjamin perceived the Fascism of his time as identifying its redemption in its bequeathing to the masses “not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves.”216 This for Benjamin logically leads to the introduction of aesthetics into political life which culminates in war where self-alienation can “experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure.”217 There appears another kind of doubling here in Benjamin’s assessment. In being an agency which gives the masses the chance and not the right to expression, the entity of Fascism appears as that which express itself via the masses through media communication technologies such as film and radio (and theoretically television as it was being developed at the time in Nazi

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217 Ibid., 242.
Germany) which all make mass audiences possible. In turn, Fascism “expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology.”

My work, *Without Sky: The Tale of the Grey Cardinal*, touches on the conundrum of masses having the chance to express themselves within flows of images and narratives within mediscapes which complicate notions of sincerity, authenticity as well as irony in power relations. The single-channel video work is an interpretation of a science-fiction short story, “Without Sky,” attributed to a Natan Dubovitsky, the alleged pen name of Vladislav Surkov, a long-time political advisor to autocratic Russian president, Vladimir Putin. Surkov has also worked as the Kremlin’s media strategist, one of its political technologists in charge of maintaining the formal appearance of democracy regardless of actual democratic participation, using the language of human rights and political representation in order to “validate tyranny, to recut and paste democratic capitalism” which had entered into post-Soviet Russia as an extreme form of free market capitalism in the form of “shock therapy,” i.e., the immediate release of price controls and the mass-scale privatization of the Soviet economy. Surkov is known as the Kremlin’s “Grey Cardinal” who organizes and controls political parties, even ones in opposition to the Kremlin with Surkov often providing funds to various political groups from neo-fascist Russian nationalist biker gangs to gay civil rights groups and liberal news magazines. He has used his position to support populist movements of every stripe in order for the Kremlin to manipulate “the new, fluctuating lines of loyalty and interest, the flows of oil and money, splitting Europe from America, pitting one Western company against another and against both

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218 Ibid.
220 Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True*, 234.
their governments so no one knows whose interests are what and where they’re headed.”

In this Surkov appears to appropriate the questioning of the ability of aesthetics and language to reflect reality as well as appropriate the questioning of objectivity itself found in the essayistic and elsewhere into an explicit methodology of managed perception.

Much of politically critical art production, especially since the late 1970s with the opening up of centralized media to production by publics and global social and economic migration, has opened up language to address issues of how shared reality is not something that exists as a neutral and autonomous ground but is mutually constructed. Questioning the ability of language and images to reflect reality since the late 1970s has been used as a means to see how the processes and identifications within the soft field of cultural practice can be a place in which to politically perform. One can see this not only within the realm of Western popular and youth cultures such as punk and hip-hop aesthetics of appropriation but in the more explicit geopolitical sphere. One can find it in the adoption of allied Iranian Marxist rhetoric by the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 in order to attack colonialism and create a nationalized state bureaucracy.

“Postmodernism,” first gaining popularity in the late 1970s, has been evoked in popular and academic press as a go to phrase in order to describe Surkov’s use of relativity and hybridity to create make-believe politics, consciously and deliberately playing with multiple cultural identities as a means to shore up the Kremlin’s political power both domestically and abroad.

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223 Hito Steyerl, “The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation,” in Wretched of the Screen, 169.
In addition to his professional work in using shifting cultural practices as a means of professional political control, Surkov has been able to build an image of himself as a self-styled aesthete of open and free eclecticism with pictures of John Lennon, Jorge Luis Borges, Joseph Brodsky and Tupac Shakur in his office. He is the alleged author of two novels penned under the same patronymic version of his wife’s name used to publish “Without Sky.” His more famous novel, Almost Zero, is a satire which centers around a character much like Surkov’s (self) image, a former publisher of avant-garde poetry who now hires destitute writers to create texts for oligarchs to pass off as their own.

Earlier in his career in 1992, just little over a year since the fall of the Soviet Union with the sudden introduction of free market capitalism, he became a publicist for the oil oligarch, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, creating a poster campaign of his boss as a newly sprouted capitalist hero with bundles of cash in his hand with the caption: “Join my bank if you want some easy money. I’ve made it; so can you!” Surkov was also a theater major in the late 1980s and knew many artists how played with shifting identities as political protest in the seemingly non-political world of everyday cultural practice. One such artist was Vladislav Monroe, who, while serving in the Soviet military, would dress up as the US icon of capitalist sexuality, Marilyn Monroe, often morphing the actress into Adolf Hitler where in Vladislav Monroe’s words, “the


227 Pomerantsev, Nothing is True and Everything is Possible, 72.
one completes the other, intensifies it and neutralizes it.” Later Monroe would perform a drag version of Putin himself.

While my video work can be understood in relation to highly contentious and ongoing aspects of the US presidential election and the subsequent election of Donald Trump, including social media infiltrations by Russian operatives either with or without the knowledge or consent of people within the Trump campaign, I created my video in ignorance of such infiltration and well before it became public knowledge in the United States. The work was created in 2015, a few months before Adrian Chen’s investigative report was published by the *New York Times* about an Internet troll factory in Saint Petersburg, the Internet Research agency, where people were paid to create social media profiles and identities as average Americans to leave seemingly innocuous pro-Kremlin comments on otherwise banal social media pages about apolitical subjects such as fortune telling, relationships, weight loss and feng shui. Since its publication in *Russian Pioneer*, a literary magazine run by Andrei Kolesnikov, one of three journalists who edited Putin’s autobiography, *In the First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia’s President*, “Without Sky” has been translated into English many times over. While it seems utterly impossible to ignore how the 2016 presidential election in the United States would (or perhaps should) color my own analysis of my video work, this chapter will not attempt to address a very specific future outcome my video could not have predicted in 2015. Instead, I will focus on how “Without Sky” itself mixes literary references and ironic strategies, and how I

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inadvertently illustrate the story through equally suggestive elements of narratives from imagined elsewheres.

### 3.2.2 Description of *Without Sky: The Tale of the Grey Cardinal*

*Without Sky: The Tale of the Grey Cardinal* is a 2 hour and 48 min loop of a 28 minute-long audio track reading of the short story coupled with a 47 minute-long video track which alternates between footage of the aftermath of the July 13, 1977 New York City blackout, and news footage of disasters and tragedies from other localities both within and without the US in 1977, including a chemical fire in Colorado, a botched flu shot epidemic in the Midwest United States, and the funeral of the leaders of the West German Leftist militant group, the Red Army Faction in Stuttgart, West Germany. The story was read by Michael Peters, an oral poet, musician and transcriber of Afrofuturist Sun Ra’s university lectures.\(^{231}\) While the work is a long repeating loop that merely shifts the points of juxtaposition of image to word as it loops, only the first cycle was ever exhibited.

It was exhibited twice to small limited groups of viewers of about twenty at a time, once to colleagues at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and once at Albany Center Gallery, a small gallery space in Albany, NY. Like many conspiracy videos, it also exists publicly online with little under sixty views. If *Without Sky: The Tale of the Grey Cardinal* is to be understood as having the chance to be an expression through mass communications technology, it must also be understood as an expression that is limited to the intimate as well as lost in the ubiquity and instantaneousness of amorphous publics writ large.

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\(^{231}\) Nathaniel Mackey, ed., *Hambone* 19 (November 15, 2009).
The short story itself is a cryptic allegory which describes a future World War V from the standpoint of a genderless child from a small nondescript village whose inhabitants become collateral damage on the ground below an ongoing war taking place in the sky. The child’s story is local, familial and intimate, while the war is grand, anonymous, abstract and suspended in the sky.

Though the war is one participated in by four non-descript military coalitions, it is one in which factions and fractions of multiple overlapping societies may participate. Genders, generations, provinces, cities and corporations all provisionally align with one another in perpetually shifting configurations even in the midst of a given battle of the perpetual war which is vaguely said to begin in “the primitive wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.” The shifting alliances of a seemingly endless war make the goals of that war impossible for the narrator to determine.

The child at times appears to be an authoritative and cynical adult, rather than a hapless victim as the child describes the seizing of disputed pieces of territory, the institutionalizing of ever-new religions, economic fluctuations and the ways in which victims of the war are given special legal protection and paraded in official symposiums and on television while the victims’ real needs go unmet. Some join in on the fighting to specifically become victims with the desperate hope that they can win some form of concessions as victims.

On the intimate and local level of the story, the child’s parents die while hiding underground. The child’s consciousness becomes two-dimensional as the child rises to the open air. The child is able to see the sky but unable to imagine height, transcendence, or a better world. Along with the rest of the village, the child seeks refuge in the city seemingly sheltered from the war as the metropolis is bombarded by the anger and envy of the victims at the city’s
gates. Left among the wreckage outside the city, the child finds other victims who all turn out to be the same age. They organize “the Society” and prepare a revolt against the perpetrators of the war, perpetrators who are now perceived by the child to be organized war mongers and not mere willy nilly participants as in the beginning of the story. The child swears that the Society will “conquer or parish” since “there is no Third Way.”232 We are left to assume that the child in attempting to resist the war merely falls into its ceaseless fold.

3.2.3 Literary References within “Without Sky”

The story makes multiple literary references. Along with cryptic allusions to grand global events: World War II (including the experiences of President Putin’s own family during the German siege of Stalingrad), multi-variant populist politics, automation, drone strikes, and 9/11, the story frames its actions within explicit allusions to multiple novels. Such novels include most prominently Edwin Abbott’s Flatland (an allegory about Victorian hierarchies and how three-dimensional objects must be perceptible to two-dimensional beings), along with Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children (about children born at the stroke of Midnight of India’s independence in 1947) and Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace.

The story, whether done consciously or not, follows Ishmael Reed’s 1986 dark satire Reckless Eyeballing where race and gender identity politics are practiced as a parlor game by New York theater practitioners. Feminists valorize Eva Braun as a victim of Nazism. A Jewish playwright is violently murdered while on a trip to a passion play performed in the Deep South. A black feminist’s play about a man’s sordid escapade of rape and murder becomes a movie

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232 “There is no Third Way” is the last sentence of the story and refers to Anthony Giddens concept of reconciling left- and right-wing politics.
financed, scripted and directed by white men. A racist white cop under cover of badge is vaguely haunted by (but unable to face up to) his own violent murderous rampage and blind persecution of black men as bank robbers and rapists of white female joggers. Feminisms find alliances with anti-Semitism. A black male playwright writes about Armenians since Jews had stolen the narratives of black men. Power relations of race and gender identity, while having real world repercussions with the lives of the novel’s own characters, is presented as a flattened field of power in a parlor game of tactics and strategies that nonetheless is ever changing and shifting. Culture is as threatened by moneyed utilization from without as it is by jockeying self-seeking artists working under the very conditions of more subtle and nuanced exploitation than had existed in the direct militancy of the 1960-70s.

Within the frame of the story, the protagonist of “Without Sky” appears as the teller of a personal tale by virtue of being an anonymous (mass) victim of a war, a war perpetuated by abstract (mass) forces of interchangeable social agencies and political identities crisscrossing in the imaginative realm of the sky. Yet, the cryptic personhood of the author, Surkov, as a real world Grey Cardinal of information warfare complicates the frame of the extrafictional realm, i.e., the “real” world the story exists in as a story. The story simultaneously works as a constructed parallel world of fiction and as one that is embedded within the extrafictional world of demands for explicit verification of an author beyond any general or abstract discursive questioning of cultural framings of authorship. In a sense, it literalizes meta-questions of authorship into a practical game of creating reality by controlling perception.

If one definition of the essayistic is that it is self-reflexive, that it is self-referential in how it situates or self-exposes the artist, writer, filmmaker or storyteller as, at best, merely self-consciously contradictory or complicit in a given political complexity found within the flow of
global mediated images, the doubtful authorship of “Without Sky” complicates any ability at deciphering self-reflexivity. This can be seen as due to the story’s alleged and factually unverifiable authorship by an architect of information warfare. At worst this can make the essayistic within “Without Sky” cynically self-satisfied. One can also read the story as a means for Surkov to expose his own strategy of creating malleable political identities within civic society and sowing seeds of discontent, giving the masses the chance to express themselves as multi-variant groups, as a strategy of control. Published in 2014, it can also signal his own dissatisfaction with the Kremlin which had recently abandoned his parlor game strategy of control for more explicit methods of dissident crackdown.

3.2.4 Images Illustrating Stories, Stories Illustrating Images

In viewing my video interpretation of “Without Sky,” one can see the interaction between the voice over telling of the tale and the news footage as an interaction of illustration. At times the footage appears as providing figurative support for the story. The video starts and ends with raw footage, as figure 3.2 shows, shot by the New York Fire Department during the 36-hour blackout that occurred between July 13-14, 1977 as firefighters put out sprawling flames at a street intersection in the Bronx. The footage, as seen in figure 3.3, suggests that the firefighters putting out the fire could be uncanny inverted stand-ins for the Marshalls of the four coalitions organizing the destructive fires of the war in the air above the village in the story. The residents of the Bronx neighborhood, who can only watch as the firefighters organize the squelching of the fires, become the child protagonist’s neighbors. The intense yet banal street scene becomes the

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battlefield where the four abstract and unnamed coalitions collide while individuals and interests switch alliances mid-battle. Later, the looting by residents in poor neighborhoods during the real life blackout appears as an example of the faceless villagers’ two-dimensional condition of not being able to see beyond the ongoing despair and continuous shocks of their living conditions.


Both the residents and the villagers appear to become *two-dimensional* by becoming media *images* for consumption from a safe distance by media consumers elsewhere as well as by the neighborhood itself. What visually unfolds becomes an imposed example for where the future war of this Russian science fiction story of a World War may be situated—that it can be situated in an American past. The theater of battle for the future war appears in grainy and worn two-dimensional footage that indicates documentation of such an immediate past. We are perhaps to understand that the footage has been cut to match up to certain phrases. However, being raw footage, it is cut only five times in the first six minutes. If the footage was cut to match the words, this would possibly involve an extreme form of control of the editing process before the video abruptly switches to a local US newsroom of professional anchormen—a new scenario in the video which could be read as the war room of strategy for the coalitions who are now not to be read as adversaries but as collaborators in how they officiate the endless war.

Like the planning and strategizing of a war, the plotting of a conspiracy theory or the institutional creation and control of populist movements, everything about the juxtaposition appears to be an uncanny planned manipulation of perception, where news images that once were the means of an immediate informational communication now appear as allegorical storytelling, as a narrative of political symbolism demanding one to decipher that which is baroquely opaque and removed from any immediate informational communication.

While the footage can appear as a mere elaboration or example of fixed hidden meanings within the story, the roles of the footage and the voiceover can be read in reverse with the raw footage dictating the malleability of how we read the story. We can read the story as based on the documented event of the footage and any extratextual knowledge about the fire a given viewer may have. The child’s lamentations on and sympathizing with the city’s safe and
privileged residents who will not let the villagers inside the city’s fortifications can be processed by a contemporary New York, US and even a potential global audience in vastly different and conflicting ways. For someone born after 1977, it can possibly be read as an ironic inverted image seemingly based on the gentrification that will come to New York post-1977 as wealthy suburbanites, global financiers and tourists will invade and replace the city’s poor citizens in real estate and imaginative representations of the city in deterritorialized mediascapes. For a long-time resident of the Bronx, it can possibly provoke memories of perpetual racist connotations of barbarity within images of looting and riots propagated to the outside world of suburbia.

Simultaneously, the white working class civil servant firefighters putting out the fires create another doubled ambivalent and cryptic image of invasion, privilege and sanitation mixed with connotations of union labor, sacrifice and drudgery not directly found in the original story, floating as a vague ambiguous and emotively conflicting suggestion like much of the emotive connotations in the video. Indeed, local events can become hard to communicate especially as they move in and out of attention based on imagined criteria from distant worlds which perpetually shift over time.

Whether, one sees the video as an illustration of the story or as that which dictates how we read the story, the video appears as if the match of words to images is intentional or deliberate towards a manipulative or calculating point. Yet, this reading however obvious and correct it may be as a receptive or retrospective interpretation is not the literal case when it comes to my own intentions when editing the video. The juxtaposition of word to image is almost completely by chance. It was not a chance that was produced methodologically. It was not produced by intentionally creating a series of methodical processes whose structure I control in order to produce uncontrollable outcomes. Rather, I had absent mindedly and wholly
unintentionally placed the audio track in a timeline I thought was blank. In reality, the timeline had the fire and news footage already in it. Having realized what I had done, I decided to watch what I had. In this sense I was forced to read the video as if someone else had made it. I had to experience the video work as if someone else had used another person’s voice over of another person’s English translation of another person’s story perhaps ghost-written by someone else for a politician propagating their own denial of having written the story under an obvious pen name.

As the video progressed, whether the clips were in a secondary position of illustrating the primary story or the story was in the supporting role of lending an interpretation of the centered footage seemed to become irrelevant. Victim and victimizer are folded in on one another coming out of a past the narrator has no clear, trusting or verifiable memory of.

### 3.2.5 Chance, Intentions and Appropriations of Intentions

“Without Sky” in an elusive way flattens contemporary identity as potentially co-optive and exploitive, a situation the video further locates through image and word juxtaposition in a seemingly similar exploitive way. An image from a news report of a doctor treating victims of a chemical fire in Colorado, as seen in figures 3.4 and 3.5, merges undeservedly and in no concrete way with the protagonist child’s bitter hatred towards a condition of the war where people channel expertise into a supposedly cowardly self-preservation. The juxtaposition appears to cynically suggest we think of the doctor as being able to “profitably administer one’s own cowardness and dullness”—by treating burn victims.

In the video, the child appears as a narrator describing their own past as a past that does not begin in 1977, but becomes tangible in that year as what has come before reaches further in vast unfathomable directions of time if it follows a narrow and vague series of trajectories set out by an unseen all-knowing omnipotent Grey Cardinal speaking through the child as a grown adult emerging from that past. Though the child as an adult becomes radicalized against this force, they, perhaps unconsciously, need it in order to navigate their way through and out of the hellish spectacle the Cardinal has the power to articulate and seemingly create and control.

The fact that the juxtaposition of word to image appeared to fit as controlled messaging seems to override my own secret knowledge that none of what happens is deliberate. There was no puppet master or “Grey Cardinal” controlling at least the editing of a story loaded with paranoia and conspiracy about media control both within and without the fictional world it portrayed. I was indeed given my chance to express myself in a contradictory mediascape of styles, images and levels of social doctrines. Such an expression can be tied more to the complexity of perception than originality in dubious ways. Placing this contemporary Russian story of a speculative future, roughly forty years in the past in 1977, through the appearance of news footage from that time, appeared to me to bring in memories of former urban neglect and malaise within the view of a current mobility of gentrifying urban geography. Professional expertise or chronic unemployment in relation to given labor demands then and now appear at times to show the child’s anger and resentment as desperate to connect abstract and distant actions to specific people, to specific fellow citizens. Media literacy concerning suggestive media spectacles and nostalgia appear to be an elusive literacy, or worse, an impossibility.

With this in mind, I placed the audio and video tracks on a loop to see at least whether this dubiously lucky happenstance was repeatable and what possibly could make it so. I was
now creating a methodology to experience and observe uncontrollable outcomes in order to see if the chance appearance of intention was repeatable. The only time the video and audio seemed to illustrate one another or fold into a seamless narrative was when the footage looped back to the spectacle of the blackout: the fires, the interviews with people in the streets, images of looting, etc. It was as if a general spectacle of mayhem and societal breakdown was enough of a visual to cynically illustrate, not Surkov’s science fiction, but Benjamin’s dark vision of the masses, including myself, being given the opportunity from on high and through the happenstance of technological breakdown to express ourselves as hapless, despondent victims. It was as if the video became a dubious way to vicariously experience a past breakdown as an aesthetic experience from a safe spatial and temporal distance, a situation whose ironic disassociation seemed thoroughly and unresolvably ambiguous.

Anthropologists, Alexei Yurchak and Dominic Boyer, in describing contemporary parody and irony in the United States, claim that despite the apparent geopolitical victory of the US in the Cold War with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, it is perhaps in Late Soviet culture that the US can see its own future.²³⁵ Yurchak and Boyer claim that the United States exists now in the twenty-first century under ideological conditions which have developed a certain form of ironic rhetoric that could be compared to Eastern European popular culture at the margins in the 1970s and 80s.²³⁶ It is an irony found in political cultures which have divorced the form of language from lived experience to such a degree that irony cannot “signal its own ironic purpose.”²³⁷ It is an irony which like Vladislav Monroe’s self-described neutralizing drag performances must become an overidentification with an object of address to the point that it

²³⁶ Ibid., 180.
²³⁷ Ibid., 181.
becomes impossible to tell whether something expressed is an earnest form of approval, a clever strategy of mockery or an ambivalent hybridity of the two extremes, as both straight forward opposition and transparent irony are both experienced as ineffective, disadvantageous or impractical.238 This overidentifying irony can also offer a moral retreat from politics as it does not require one to denounce an assumed idealism such as democracy, free market capitalism or socialism.239

To Yurchak and Boyer, this is a result of an authoritative discourse becoming “saturated with overcrafted, repetitive and frequently esoteric formulations,” a discourse which distances itself from its own eagerness for close and familiar attachment with the language and thinking of its anonymous citizens.240 As signs become removed from the lived reality of people as individuals, collectives, and even as inhabitants of institutional societies, a performative shift occurs away from literal meaning as authoritative discourse already is experienced as a caricature of itself forcing explicit or straight forward criticism to be uncannily predictable and futile.241 One way out is to positionlessly inhabit given norms as parody. For Yurchak and Boyer, this form of irony is found in a twenty-first century American context in cable television programs such as *South Park* and *The Colbert Report*.242 It is a blank parody which exists in a context of ostensibly open and multi-variant discourse in liberal democracy, yet is comparable to an experience of official language under totalitarian Stalinism. It can take the form of representing all openly contesting political inclinations and articles of faith as “equally corrupt,

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238 Ibid., 213.
239 Ibid., 183.
240 Ibid., 182.
241 Ibid., 182.
242 Ibid., 184.
deformed and hypocritical” to a public that is itself deterritorialized, creating an understanding that is neither for nor against any polemic.\textsuperscript{243}

While Yurchak and Boyer see this style of rhetoric as existing earlier within late Soviet culture, journalist Peter Pomerantsev sees its contemporary post-Soviet Russian incarnation in Surkov’s media strategy arising at least partially from the introduction of western European postmodern texts in the new Russia.\textsuperscript{244} Pomerantsev depicts Surkov as continuously invoking Jean Baudrillard’s \textit{Simulacra and Simulation} as the political strategist for a deliberately “postmodern dictatorship” simultaneously denounces relativism and promotes conservatism.\textsuperscript{245} He characterizes Surkov as harnessing relativism to “use the language of rights and representation to validate tyranny.”\textsuperscript{246}

Critical analysis often allows for appropriation by otherwise adversarial entities, not necessarily as a co-option, incorporation or subversion, but as transparently useful or vitalizing for heavily conservative institutions. Many postmodern texts written or published in the late 1970s, meant as negative critical analysis of militarism, capitalism, consumerism and westernization, including Jean Baudrillard’s \textit{Simulacra and Simulation}, Paul Virilio’s \textit{Speed and Politics}, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s \textit{A Thousand Plateaus}, and Guy Debord’s \textit{Society of the Spectacle} have all been studied by Russian, European, Israeli and US military academies, political institutions and advertising industries for their strategic usefulness.\textsuperscript{247} By so thoroughly analyzing institutional framings of reality as stanch critique such theories can perform as a kind

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\item \textsuperscript{243} Ibid., 184.
\item \textsuperscript{244} Pomerantsev, \textit{Nothing is True and Everything is Possible}, 74.
\item \textsuperscript{245} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{246} Ibid., 75.
\end{itemize}
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of inadvertent “conceptual avant-garde” for the institutions such theories hoped to invalidate.\(^{248}\) They can become manuals for strategies.

They can also be taken up by other forms of dissent. The earlier Frankfurt School critiques of Herbert Marcuse along with Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s critical analysis of the administrative and technologically determining conditions of postwar industrial societies can be said to have had a direct and indirect influence on segments of the Right alienated by the social acceptance and institutionalization of conservatism. Frankfurt School critiques of the bureaucratization of modern liberal democracies can be seen as partially comparable to right-wing distrust of affirmative action and multiculturalism as an administered imposition by the state on an otherwise naturally superior European culture.\(^{249}\) Paul Gottfried, a child of Holocaust survivors and paleo-conservative student of Marcuse and coiner of the twenty-first century neologism, “alt-right,” a term he allegedly coined with his protégé, contemporary white supremacist, Richard Spencer, explicitly states that he saw Herbert Marcuse’s critique of the modern state as having strong affinities with his own political outlook. He also saw Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as having “profoundly conservative implications,” especially in the text’s critique of liberal democracy, helping in the pursuit of “diametrically opposed moral and cultural ends” than Frankfurt School philosophers had intended.\(^{250}\)

One can see critical theory as engaging in the production of histories rather than “making history” as an objective of action.\(^{251}\) Theory can reflect on the power it lacks in often presenting continuous pasts for the purposes of future actions. One can be in a general locale of political

\(^{251}\) De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 7-8.
complexities without being where such power is explicitly enacted for future trajectories. One focuses on situations rather than objectives.\(^{252}\)

The framing of identity politics as a suspended parlor game, as *Reckless Eyeballing* explores, may be a way into seeing how the free play of images of social groups as strategic essentialism is interdependent with political objectives of actors that harness such images of identity. Images can in turn become actors, seeming to take on a life of their own. This is one way to frame one critical text written in the late 1970s, Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*, which, like Yurchak and Boyer’s notion of rhetoric as no longer reflecting the lived realities of a society, attempts to analyze a condition where a signifier no longer refers to something that guarantees a stable reality.

While Baudrillard frames simulacra as “no longer” a matter of “imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody” but rather a matter of replacing “the signs of the real for the real,” of creating an operational double, Bakhtin’s notions of heteroglossia and the dialogical sheds light on contradictions in Baudrillard’s conception of the real as dissipating. Heteroglossia and speech genres do not assume a pure ground of the real (in itself) that needs to be seen as no longer there. Bakhtin’s notion of language does not need a real to lament the passing of as “no longer,” a phrase Baudrillard uses repeatedly throughout *Simulacra and Simulation* to emphasize an historical change in perception his theory depends on. Baudrillard’s argument needs the real to exist in order to declare that it has been substituted by pure simulacra of images which have no relation to a reality but only have relations to each other as images. Yet, as Bakhtin points out, languages and meanings are no mere representations of the world. We are born into dynamic ever changing forms and meanings of social *languages*. This immersive dynamism of form and

\(^{252}\) Ibid., 8.
meaning is the world of the real. The real can only be experienced if it is shared as it is experienced differently. Heteroglossia and dialogism are no mere forms of relativism.

The real can never be a pure referential ground detached from, not representation, but from social meaning formation. Heteroglossia points to how the real (in and of itself) is the more dubious self-referential image as something removed from evolving meaning formation. Yet, while forms of speech can exist as active tactics and strategies within an dynamic democracy, they can appear to become clichés under a declining one creating the experience of a dissipating reality.253

Even though they are not a matter of tactics or strategies, but rather concern explanatory narrative frames, conspiracy theories are often understood as a means of understanding motivations behind perceived acts as constructed deliberate plots, however paranoid, convoluted or wrapped up in desires for importance in being persecuted such perceived plots may be defined as. In the United States, Richard Hofstadter relegated conspiracy theories as limited to the politically marginalized, including left-wing populists and the political right.254 Hofstadter’s assumption of a liberal democratic consensus assumes in turn that any challenge to the notion of elections being free and fair or that they are publicly produced is pathological or diseased.255 However, a number of US presidents including Andrew Jackson, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon have often voiced fears of plots against them, including active Senators, communists and East Coast elites respectively.256

255 Mark Fenster, Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
256 Jesse Walker, The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 3-22. After a gunman tries to kill President Jackson, he accuses Senator George Poindexter of being part of a plot behind the attempt on his life only to in turn be accused of organizing the plot to gain sympathy and public support.
In addition, even though many left wing political groups in the 1960s and 70s could be rightfully paranoid of government surveillance, the FBI’s Counterintelligence Program, or COINTELPRO, can be seen as caught up in fears of vague plots. The program created cryptic messaging based on the assumption that many “subversive” groups within the United States, including white supremacist groups, were indeed paranoid enough themselves to take cryptic notes such as “Beware! The Siberian Beetle” surreptitiously left on door steps by the FBI as signs of mystical, sinister meaning, while the FBI simultaneously engaged in conventional tactics such as infiltrating collaborative groups such as the Black Panthers and Students for a Democratic Society to turn on each other.257

Conspiracy theories can permeate all levels and layers of politics, including dissenters, as well as institutions and individuals in centers of power; they also can occur in times of cohesiveness as well as divisiveness, economic downturns and upturns, with threats perceived as coming from above, below, internal to a given polity or as part of a xenophobic fantasy.258 As COINTELPRO’s suspicion of New Leftist plots shows, beliefs in conspiracies in turn create their own plots, revealing the dynamic interactions between oppositional forces Raymond Williams in 1977 described as part of hegemonic practices and not relegated to mere belief systems.259 As such, dominant classes in practice can, at least partially, be as subject as subordinate classes to the ideologies that centers of power themselves propagate.

Such use of language in the COINTELPRO program perhaps cannot come under the heading of a blank parody or the appropriation of critical discourse by political institutions of control but rather point to the transpolitical nature of rhetorical tactics within simulated speech

257 Ibid., 157-163.
258 Ibid., 8-9.
259 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 109.
acts, speech acts which are not direct actions by their utterance but are iterated to provoke actions in perceived adversaries or patsies.

3.2.6 Order and Randomness in Media Zones

For Hannah Arendt, the rise of fascism and Nazism in the 1920s and 30s relied on conspiracies, not as a means to uncover hidden motivations per se, but to present hidden narratives as pure mystery or mysticism.\textsuperscript{260} Masses for Arendt, cannot trust the visible reality of randomness within lived experience but must rely on the imaginative wrapped up in whatever appears as “at once universal and consistent in itself.”\textsuperscript{261} As such anonymous groupings of people decoupled from former group interests can become susceptible to every and all ideologies or systems of beliefs. This, for Arendt, can occur in so far as such systems treat facts like interchangeable examples of causes and eradicate chance by creating an all-powerful cause where conspiratorial messaging escapes from a referential reality into a suspended fiction.\textsuperscript{262}

A defining feature of the essay film can be its attempt to choose elements of existing narrative frames, not to transcend out of inconsistent reality, but \textit{transcend into such inconsistency}, a reality which appears weak and vulnerable when faced with the rationalized or patterned consistency of fiction or conspiracies theories which treat any given as proof of intentions as universal laws. Simulacra is perhaps a \textit{sense} of the withering away of the real as independent and verifiable in so far as chance and randomness seem to disappear. Chance and randomness as something untied to omnipotent cosmological power allows the real to be more

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{260} Hannah Arendt, \textit{The Origins of Totalitarianism} (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 262.
\item \textsuperscript{261} Ibid., 262.
\item \textsuperscript{262} Ibid., 263.
\end{itemize}
than just a series of mere examples of a universal consistency suspended and untouched by the real that such consistency is supposed to be the master of.

Here Adorno’s concept of the essay as positioning itself in texts that already exist in their authority in order to gain a critical tendency towards previous texts’ “own emphatic concepts” by finding unity in breaks rather than covering them over is complicated perhaps by a new unifying experience of the fragmentary as a suspect primary condition of consistency in discourse. To interpret the video *Without Sky* as a mere critique of the short story “Without Sky” is dubious, not because the word to image juxtaposition in the editing lacks a crafted deliberation but because the audience has no window into this happenstance and chance that one finds in reality imbricated with the imposed laws of transcendent fictions. The juxtapositions appear opaquely intentional and illustrative of the Grey Cardinal’s historical narrative of war.

In “Without Sky,” randomness and chance are not only the unintended basis of how strips of images and words develop sense formation. They are also part and parcel to the mode of existing outside the ordered sanctuary of the city. Chance and randomness are the modes of existing as collateral damage, as ostensibly unspecified targets in the story’s war.

One could criticize Baudrillard for universalizing the media experiences of those who—protected by being in “the rich part of the world”—encounter reality becoming a spectacle, as news is transformed into entertainment and situations must become spectacles in order to be experienced as exemplars of the real (from a safe, removed and suspended distance).

The notion of simulacra may be criticized for ignoring the segregation of the zones of theater, especially theaters of war where people do not have the luxury of “patronizing reality” as in those zones where people have the privilege of being spectators of other people’s pain.

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264 Ibid., 131.
However, these media “zones” have become profoundly overlaid with one another since the 1970s as the consuming of media becomes dependent on the inter-dependent production and proliferation of it from multiple sources and conditions. It is not only mere consumerist spectacle that has become a new experience for those in the post-Cold War Global South previously kept outside of twentieth century centralized media reception zones of reality becoming a removed spectacle in the so-called West or Global North. Such zones have become where electronic capitalism has come to thrive, for instance, in India with technology hubs providing low-end cheap labor and low cost support for US and transnational corporations.\textsuperscript{265} This in turn has created the largest number of billionaires in a nation where 500 million people still cannot read or write.\textsuperscript{266}

Overlays do not flatten or homogenize global zones. Rather, in their shifting relations of what we understand random and controlled to respectively be, such overlays shift our comprehension of previous, i.e., “no longer,” existing referential realities. While previous zones of the geopolitics of the Cold War which had given a new version or iteration of the West in the modern technostructure of managed corporate capitalism in the late twentieth century, one can see the certainty of antithesis of the geopolitical zones of East and West out living the specific postwar geopolitics which prompted it in the first place.\textsuperscript{267} This is paradoxically true as Western capitalism was able to declare its victory over global socialism as an “end of history” by turning Russia and other former Soviet and Warsaw states into future-guiding utopic versions of free-market capitalism as exploitable markets.\textsuperscript{268} In the spectre of comparisons, in which one is forced to see appearances in the world as both up-close and far away in suspiciously

\textsuperscript{266} Ibid., 60.
interchangeable contexts, both “zones” are forced into future trajectories of each other’s pasts. The opaque irony in the Soviet Union (before perestroika opened up public discourse) can be framed as being in a cynically superior position of predicting a thoroughly hyper-consciousness about images and signs becoming detached from discursive value in our current global capitalism. One can also (perhaps condescendingly) perceive a post-Soviet Russia as “finally” catching up to the corrupt consumerist zones of Western media spectacles, zones which have ostensibly long been privileged to “patronize reality.”

Zones can be porous. Within my video, the mental space of the protagonist victim can be seen as that of a secure spectator occupied by the omniscient voice of an abstract and universal oppressor existing somewhere vaguely in the sky. Yet, this overlapping of multiple zones dubiously does not homogenize but holds their differences in anxious suspension.

In the video, we are perhaps a bit free to interpret but there is in this freedom the potential for no common normalizing or anchoring of our emotional response as valid or legitimate in a shared discursive reality. What we see is merely a series of images we can read as images from journalism but we perhaps are at a loss to connect these images to any specific events they may have been referencing from the past. We can enter them at an emotional register of the allegorical, but this emotional register threatens to be more solipsistic the further we are removed from context, a removal which can invade theaters of catastrophe as such theaters fold into a patronizing of reality.

The juxtaposition of “Without Sky” with footage of the spectacle of fires and looting during the 1977 New York City blackout certainly calls to mind zones of segregation concerning atrocity spectacles from contemplative or distracted viewings of it. Because the video jumps around a sparse number of socially coded locales without context (urban ghetto, airport,
cemetery, suburban domesticity, Leftist store front, newsroom, etc.) while focusing on New York City, the zone of the war can appear as both an abstract, nebulous or generic figure of intimate or familiar locale and as an exhaustive and expansive domain of influence. The footage I had dumped in my timeline may have been random and unintended in terms of its juxtaposition with the voiceover. However, despite a need to appropriate or reconfigure simulacra within mediascapes into new narratives according to nebulous criteria from some perceived or imagined world, the spectre of comparisons both within the video and beyond it point to how the real becomes something that is no longer, a “no longer” which is a difference of degree rather than kind as shared realities change.

We may be aware that during the 1970s, arson fires in New York, averaging forty a day, were often started by landlords for insurance money, tenants wanting to be put at the top of the list for public housing due to their current living conditions as well as by thrill-seekers and hired arsonists. We may know from chronicles in newspapers that during the blackout the number of fires reached 1037 in a 25-hour period. We may contextualize this in terms of the low revenue and bankruptcy of the city due to the white-flight out of the city, especially in the South Bronx after the creation of the Cross-Bronx expressway by Robert Moses, where the fires were overwhelmingly concentrated. Or perhaps we only see mayhem, destruction, clichéd notions of the looters as barbarians or newscasters as mouthpieces for an authoritarian state of media. We may see the media as the only institution able to absorb the shocks of ever shifting alliances of identities by dint of being dubiously neutral reporters. We may first see people outside in the streets, secondly we see a riot, thirdly an unspecified chaos referring cryptically to something beyond the immediate reported event.

There is nothing to guarantee a common reading or one which can neatly tie interpretations to images however much we may desire such certainty. Perhaps this is the space in which one can oddly be self-reflexive about the locality of our positionlessness. This is especially relevant at the emotional level since the footage as “news,” i.e., as new information, for a public at a previous specific moment in time has disappeared into a past whose social reality has since drastically altered. In a sense, such footage can never address a future such floating footage does not know. A story appears on television or in newspapers in 1977. However, it soon dissipates into a sea of other news. We may imagine the story still continuing on with some connection to our own immediate lives or those of others. As journalism, the footage’s context can be lost on viewers from another time, a context more fraudly bound up with dubious speculation which can turn what is potentially a shared sense of the real into co-optable mysterious expression.

3.3 March 28, 1977

To reiterate what has been claimed in this dissertation, what makes up or can even be recognized as a personal story is often caught up in what happens beyond oneself. It can be so thoroughly tied to genres or forms which guide a reading public to recognize something as personal and can be caught up with not only one’s own motivations beyond one’s story but those of given publics at any given time. One narrative strain of the essayistic is that it can attempt to pay attention to issues of ambiguity and non-methodological methods as the essayistic creates the personal as an intersection of a given world with: fact, fiction, philosophical abstraction,
conspiracy theory as an ambivalent narrative mode, or child-like memory which is supposed to simultaneously be pre-scientific and learn structured thinking through the essay as a format.

The essayistic follows this non-methodical method often by discussing something close at hand and treating it as a given. Essay films can do this by recycling into their own narratives through film and video material already produced, re-rhetoricizing it into something new. Essay films tend to treat this as something not unique to essay films or videos but something already a part of everyday practice by institutions and more and more by individuals as recording, archiving, distribution and display capabilities become more and more seemingly decentralized and less concentrated in twentieth century iterations.

This chapter will focus on the contradictions of personal memory by focusing on how my essay film, *March 28, 1977* narrates the creation of impossible memories before being born by imagining a social world already born into, one which is convolutedly experienced at a removal via television, creating a doubled social world. I explore the expository mode of narrating a television news documentary about the short-lived and largely unrecognized white-minority state of Rhodesia, whose prime minister declared the de facto illegal state to be the preserver of “justice, civilization and Christianity.” This narration is based on a real-life documentary broadcast opposite the Academy Awards ceremony one month and one day before I was born. Following the mode of US, British, Australian and Rhodesian news documentaries on Rhodesia from the late 1970s, I explore what happens when such objectified narration must contend with not just the glamour of the Oscars but speculative memories before birth. I will first give a background and description of the work. Next, I will discuss how the supposedly personal story in the essay film is to be found more ingrained in a temporal relation to recorded images of events happening elsewhere than in autobiographical events.
3.3.1 Research Beginnings

The essay film, *March 28, 1977*, began in browsing New York City newspapers on microfilm from 1977 housed at the New York State Library, next door to where I currently reside. I wanted to be able to wander through synchronic documents of 1977 as things to be treated as merely there to be found, but hardly ever really are.

While browsing the *New York Daily News* and *New York Post*, I began to develop games with myself to develop strategies or methods to look for something in particular while maintaining an open-endedness. In a sense, I wanted to avoid having an explicit inquiry that would prevent me from seeing what happened to be in front of me. Usually historians, professional and amateur alike, come to archives because they are following through with stories they in some way already know.\(^{271}\) Often, the move to a stored archive is done to verify or find evidence for what has already been mentioned, turned over, interpreted, gossiped about, or debated over through academic discourse as well as informal neighborhood accounts of local communities or familial discussions concerning ancestry, the latter being one of the more popular uses of the State Library with its census records. While this move may help in finding evidence which can prove a falsehood, raise more questions upon entering, or simply corroborate what was already in a sense known, it also points to the predestined nature of the story one is searching for. One, in a sense, has already written one’s history before entering an archive which historically is supposed to segregate itself off from the greater dynamic world of rumor, legend and interpretation. In this way archives are the twentieth century’s mysticized bureaucratic spaces.

Acknowledging this general problem of predetermining your inquiry, I needed to further acknowledge the inevitability of falling into such a predetermination’s trap. I knew that in spite of myself, I was looking for places which could no longer be found by going into the space of frozen time newspapers of microfilm are supposed to be. Browsing through New York papers, this could easily and banally show up in an obsolete business address or in a now defunct company name or a picture of a location I know to have completely altered in appearance.

Further afield from defunct business addresses yet in close proximity in print, I came across countries whose names have changed over time (as when the Democratic Republic of Congo changed to Zaire only to go back to the Democratic Republic of Congo) or I found articles about places which have changed national sovereign control (as in the case of the Sinai Peninsula exchanging back and forth between Egyptian and Israeli control between 1967-79). I found stories about North and South Yemen and more well-known stories concerning the Soviet Union, West Germany and Yugoslavia. Though I knew the specifics of nationstates to constantly be in flux, the system of nations itself seemed to be a stable one of invention one could not escape or think otherwise.

In the context of the modular system of newspapers in the twentieth century, nationalism and nationstates did seem to appear as part of an modular system of the modern world to be read as a “community of nations” becoming one version of something like “universal history” particular to 1977.\(^272\) While still apprehensive at the prospect of such a suspect predetermination, I began wondering if I could come across a nation which perhaps took on such a cookie-cutter form, yet whose name I was unfamiliar with. It seemed possible that the mere name of a city, town, national park, province, or international body of water could possibly have

come and gone. However, due to their explicit connection with overt public political causes, it seemed more likely that in newspaper headlines, transient attempts at solidifying territory would be found in the modular system of producing nationstates before a global public of geopolitics, even in or especially in tabloid newspapers such as The New York Post or The Daily News which are notorious for the prominence of their eye-catching and often witty headlines. In addition, such attempts at territorial claims would be more common even as late as 1977 than in 2019 where contemporary resurgences in ethnic white nationalism in Europe and the United States as well as Ottomanism and Hindu nationalism in Turkey and India respectively do not appear as attempts at creating new territorial states. Such newer claims to nationalism appear to aim instead at claiming cultural sovereignty within the already existing modular system of formal (if not in reality substantial) democracy and within specific nationstates which have since the late 1970s lost their economic sovereignty or control within exponentially increasing transnational capitalism.\(^{273}\)

It was at this point of seeming to fall into the mode of pre-established intentions that I came across a headline in a March 17 edition of the New York Post: “Oscar’s competition to be documentary on Rhodesia.”\(^{274}\) The two column article about two upcoming broadcasts appeared in the television listings section for the day. In the article, the writer, Bob Williams, describes his disappointment in CBS choosing to air a documentary, “Who’s Got a Right to Rhodesia?” about the now defunct white-minority state of Rhodesia, at the same time as 70 million viewers in the US will be more focused on the 49th Annual Academy Awards. To air the documentary at such a time, Williams said, would deprive the documentary of a more substantial audience. He further states that the documentary’s writer and producer, Irv Drasnin, is “deserving of


\(^{274}\) Bob Williams, “Oscar’s competition to be documentary on Rhodesia,” New York Post, March 17, 1977, 41.
sympathy, the programmer of scorn.\textsuperscript{275} It may seem odd in 2019 to think that The New York Post would run an article politically slanted so, as the paper is now more known for its right-wing sensationalism. However, despite the fact that the media mogul, Rupert Murdoch, bought it out two years prior in 1975, the oldest continuing running newspaper, founded by Alexander Hamilton, was in 1977 decidedly more connected to postwar progressive (and albeit at times equally sensational) journalism, focusing on political justice and labor issues for its urban blue-collar audience.\textsuperscript{276}

I was thoroughly and perhaps naively of a mindset that the Oscars could be framed as a dying institution. This seemed to stem from its existence as an institution of cyclical ritual where the endurance of the ceremony itself and what happens in the transitory moment means more than the enduring legacy of the awards and films themselves. This sense of decay despite popularity can also be seen in the fact that despite the establishment of the awards ceremony in 1929 as a way to celebrate the arts and sciences of the new twentieth-century visual medium of film, the Academy announced in 2019 that awards for Cinematography and Editing would not be aired, an announcement made by the president of the Academy, John Bailey, himself a well-established cinematographer.\textsuperscript{277} One can get an impression of irrelevance from the angle of the ceremony being something that solidifies its institutionality be being cyclically in time as it creates its disposable archival list of winners and losers. Even in being recorded for posterity’s sake, footage from each ceremony is rarely recycled outside its immediate presence as news.

\textsuperscript{275} Ibid.
The documentary, however, seemed to me to be potentially something more, in spite of or because of its transient broadcasting failure as a documentary about racial injustice in a nationstate which has since disappeared as a business address. In telling a US public about the political negotiations in an ongoing guerilla war in southern Africa between an apartheid-like white-minority state and Marxist African nationalists, the documentary seemed to be able to narrate further than the awards ceremony does as a continual annual marker of time. In fact, as my research had come to show, despite the Academy Awards overwhelming audience share and general visibility, I was able to find more sources of academic analysis since the late 1970s that have specifically addressed media coverage concerning the white-minority-state of Rhodesia and its successor African state of Zimbabwe in both print and television news journalism (as well as in novels, memoirs, and cinema) than I could find sources that addressed the Academy as a subject in and of itself outside of popular and professional trade magazines. Rather than simply providing discrediting evidence as to the significance of the Oscars, such disparities in varieties of scholarship and commentary can create both a relative complexity and an inverse of what constitutes ephemerality and endurance, popularity, professional vs. academic analysis, and relevance in a given context of film narratives and narratives about film.

3.3.2 Description of *March 28, 1977*

With this in mind, I went about creating a dual-screen interpretation of flipping channels back and forth between the Oscars ceremony and the documentary as if I were an adult commentator preparing my fetal self for the world yet to come as if such a world could only be experienced via two-dimensional windows on the world. Exhibited as a theater set up at EMPAC, as seen in figure 3.6, the audience is presented with a large curtained theatrical screen on which footage of Rhodesia taken from Drasnin’s documentary is interchangeably mixed with footage from other documentaries on the country from the US, Britain, Australia and Rhodesia itself filmed in the late 1970s, all in color. Off to the left, on a small black and white RCA television set manufactured in 1977, the audience is presented with footage from both the ceremony and the films nominated that night. While both screens, one large and in color and one small and in black and white trudge along in their respective worlds, the narrator starts to make associative suggestions.

![Installation view of March 28, 1977 by Maureen Jolie Anderson, 2018 at the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center in Troy, NY March 28, 2018.](image)

A black comedian with a British accent and dressed in a tuxedo, as seen in figure 3.7, appears on the big screen. He is laughing with an unseen audience, then points with feigned innocence to the camera, saying, “Is that in color? I hope it is, because if it’s in black and white, it will be very negative.” He then quickly disappears again. Next, a reworking of an uncited quote from playwright, Wole Soyinka, about the inversion of ancestor worship in Yoruba myth is iterated by my voiceover which declares, “The memories of the yet to be born can be older than those of the already dead.”

My voiceover in reaching back in time to my not-yet-born self complains of not being able to remind my habitual adult self that time is not necessarily unidirectional but that such attempts at multiple frames of temporality never work. Another man on the big screen, as seen in figure 3.8, this time being interviewed by an unseen interlocutor appears to state that this uni-directional thinking “is the aspect which provides hope for the future,” before quickly disappearing again. We are not given the context for what he is specifically addressing but are forced to take it as a comforting assurance to the narrator. In its original news documentary context, the man is discussing the 1976 Kissinger Proposals to set up a constitution and have majority rule in two years but even in the original documentary his name or affiliation is not given. This sparse use of clips appears on both screens throughout the video.

Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 10. The quote from Soyinka is, “The world of the unborn, in the Yoruba world-view, is as evidently older than the world of the living as the world of the living is older than the ancestor-world.”

Both Rhodesia and the Oscars are named over and over again as is the broadcasting date, but the impressionistic sound bite nature of the clips removes them from their immediate filmed context. It also adds to the sense that we do not have a reliable narrator. The voiceover seems to lack genuine situational authority needed to explicate to the audience about the Oscars or Rhodesia. It is almost like a child who has learned well a satisfactory-level of reciting a speech on a given topic while failing to have a specific purpose or thesis. We are told that the unspecified regime of Rhodesia declared its independence as the nation’s independence in 1965 for the sake of “justice, civilization and Christianity.” Who exactly declared this independence? Under what conditions? The narrator assumes no need to explain who the people are as they float across the two screens. We are never told the name of the Prime Minister of Rhodesia (Ian Smith) even as he is given ample air time in an interview.

It was my intention to present Rhodesia as a fictionalized generic state, one that can appear to sprout from nothing, lacking specific history even as the documentary footage, interviews and commentary from the original documentary voice overs sometimes prove otherwise. This tension of being generic and specific is further complicated by the narrator’s persistence in comparing the nationstate to the United States. After an Oscar is presented to Leonard Rosenman for Best Adapted Score for his version of Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land,” my voiceover considers if “sometimes our entry into the world of the living only comes about because that world is dying.” The voiceover further thinks that we seem to be called forth into this world, not to maintain or revive it but to observe that world’s death in a cold and neutral tone (almost but not quite like an authoritative voice in a news spot whose form assumes objectivity). If we were to do otherwise, we may start to think we own this world by merely living there.
This thought is accompanied first by what appears to be old stone ruins, then moving on to an image of a small nondescript contemporary building with a sign reading “African Toilets,” only to move further on to a sign for a country club golf course declaring “FOR MEMBERS ONLY” before a black man polishes a door to a shop whose entrance states “Right of Admission Reserved.” It takes prior knowledge to know that the ruins are of the Great Zimbabwe (1270-1550), an old inland walled city built off wealth obtained from mining and trade with Arabia, India and possibly China, while the golf course as a ubiquitous and generic space of old-fashioned Western exclusivity (racial, economic or otherwise) also lacks local contextualization.280 The references threaten to obscure which specific world is actually dying. Is it the Great Zimbabwe? Is it the reclamation of Zimbabwe now being used as a reference for a political cause? Is this dying world, paradoxically, a future nation to begin in the next decade in 1980? Is the dying world a very specific British Empire or a more general “West”? Is it Rhodesia? Is it the Shona and Ndebele in southern Africa? It isn’t even possible to know if the voiceover is referring simply to a matter-of-fact world, one that is just ahistorically “there,” which could nevertheless simply disappear.

Where the voiceover lacks in weightier nuanced arguments for its supporting details, it makes up for in uncanny associations between the Oscars and the documentary, associations which meander in the non-space of non-living about concrete worlds. After we leave this ambiguous or obscured world of the dying, a white man in a tuxedo on the small black and white set asks us to “imagine a fantastic city of the twenty-third century, a futuristic utopia, ecologically balanced, filled with unending pleasures, absent of individual responsibility, and nurtured by complete sexual freedom...Yes, Newark, New Jersey.” As quickly as we may be

able to understand this suggestion to be the dying world, the video cuts and we are forced to
move on.

We are informed that even though the overwhelming share of the audience for the awards
show will come from the suburbs, only one film nominated actually takes place in one. We are
never informed which film this is (Carrie). Yet, without any explicit argumentative reason, we
are informed that a journalist had once described Rhodesia itself as a suburb masquerading as a
nation with a large number of swimming pools, second only to Beverly Hills. This is followed
by a view from a helicopter of the black township of Saint Mary’s as another version of a suburb
and where the opposition to the generic regime gets its support, a township comparable to
Johannesburg’s Soweto. Even as the segregated living quarters for Rhodesia’s black urban
servant class, Saint Mary’s looks uncannily like a sprawling Levittown of postwar American
upward mobility in its formal modular and rigid grid-like appearance from a comfortable aerial
distance, as seen in figure 3.9.

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281 Luise White, *Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization* (Chicago, IL:
University of Chicago Press, 2015), 29. In a footnote, White states that the quote has been attributed to both Alan
Cohen of *Punch* and David Astor of the *Observer.*
Soon enough we are told about the Oscar’s biggest winner, an unnamed film (Network), which appears to predict the competing documentary’s own broadcasting failure through the genre of fiction. We are told that the film concerns a failing US broadcasting network which in an attempt to win back a larger share of the audience, appeals to anti-establishment sentiments of the time while still being accountable to management. This narration is juxtaposed, not to footage of such media management in the US, but footage of a laughing white audience at a nightclub and a press conference held by Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe African Nationalist Union. Here an audience as a symbolic social milieu of the safely removed and anonymous suburbs and the secretive guerilla political militants are now all visible if silent actors.

We are introduced to Edmund, a meek and despondent young African man presented in front of a brick wall as a captured guerilla soldier in the same Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation news documentary on the Kissinger Proposals from before. As he answers questions to an off-camera interlocutor, we learn that he comes from Wedza District and that he has traveled to Tanzania and Russia, which in the original context of the RBC film was for military training. It was common practice for the Rhodesian military to create these “captured terrorist” films out of whole cloth as evidence of both the state’s military success and the deviousness of Zimbabwe nationalist armies kidnapping and brainwashing susceptible yet otherwise law-abiding and compliant Africans. However, instead of elucidating this point for the audience, I use the coincidence of the name “Edmund” assigned to the man in the film with the name of a fictional character in Zimbabwean science-fiction novelist, Dambudzo Marechera’s fictive autobiographical novel, *House of Hunger*, written in 1977.
In the novel, whose own factual authenticity is hotly debated to this day, we meet this other Edmund as a fellow classmate Marechera befriends as a teenager out of pity. Marechera later physically assaults him for his shy reclusive love of classic Russian novels and inability to stick up for himself. Marechera depicts the decidedly apolitical Edmund later as having been effortlessly baited into joining an unnamed liberation army. This background, too, is omitted. Instead, in the video, the gap in political and cultural sources between the two Edmunds collapses under the disjointed similarities between the two. The doubly fictive Edmund is the only character I name in the essay film, aside from two people nominated for Academy Awards named elsewhere.

With my appropriation of these two Edmunds, I move on to verbally describe (without any image) how many of the films depicting mutilated and mangled bodies produced by the Rhodesian government will be destroyed in the last years of the war. Issues of the depiction of war atrocities in Africa, especially the appearance (and non-appearance) of dead and disfigured Africans as both pity and atrocity porn for Western audiences has been part of an ongoing debate in colonial and post-independence Africa. However, the choreographed depiction and possible wholesale enacting and staging of war atrocities by Rhodesia’s propaganda machine, the Ministry of Information, complicates and adds to the history of this broader debate. While I will address this specific issue in more detail later, in the context of my own essay film the voiceover does not address this broader media issue head-on which makes the narrator seem like they not only lack specific local situational authority but can make us suspect that the speaker lacks

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familiarity with long-standing deterritorialized debates concerning Africans as objectified props for Westerners as fantasizers of imperial conquest and humanitarian heroism to consume.\(^{283}\)

However, this particular absence of explicit argumentation concerning expected debates about atrocities and media spectatorship between First and Third Worlds, Global Norths and Global Souths, Western and non-Western worlds is perhaps contradicted by associative links made earlier about suburbs as places for both television markets shares in the US and as places of support for Marxist militants in black townships in southern Africa.

The phrase “It’s March 28, 1977” is repeated with mere conventional variations in describing the days, hours or weeks before my birth. This measured time at a standstill reiterates itself while the voiceover reaches both into an approaching immediate doomed future for the modular regime and into a generational past of a globally referenced tragedy which promises to be cyclical. The imminent future is of Rhodesia’s ongoing war with Zimbabwean nationalists as depicted in news footage from Britain and its former “settler colonies” from 1977-79 in the lead up to the founding of present-day Zimbabwe in April 1980. The long arc of the ancestral past is of the Holocaust as depicted in the relatively high number of films nominated for Academy Awards in 1977 about the World War II genocide in Europe roughly 40 years prior.\(^{284}\) Later, archival footage from World War II used at the beginning of Seven Beauties (nominated for Best Director and Best Foreign Film) is presented as if from “an old war film.”

Towards the end, as the time of the child not yet born will not catch up with the meandering of memory (which easily jumps around in references to an apparent reality), my adult self is forced to declare that the child will never be born. Instead we are left with a bitter-


\(^{284}\) In 1977, four films addressing the Holocaust were nominated. In the five years prior to and after 1977 only one film a year had been nominated.
sweet acceptance speech of the Jamaican wife of the recently deceased winner for Best Actor, the Australian actor, Peter Finch, for his dark comedic role in *Network* as a mentally unstable newscaster. This is followed by straight-laced and somber closing remarks from Irv Drasnin concerning recently-elected US president Jimmy Carter’s newly declared approach to human rights at the UN as one which reaches beyond specific political systems or philosophies to encompass racial justice in achieving majority rule in southern Africa by peaceful means. The credits then roll from both the Oscars and the documentary.

### 3.3.3 Personal Primordial Memories of Impersonal Recordings

Following Montaigne’s methodology of writing about a given topic of the day as a means for writing about oneself and vice versa, by having two opposing poles act as stand-ins for each other, it was my attempt to show how similar this method is to ways children appear to easily combine abstract actions to concrete particulars. This does not bring one closer to the concreteness of autobiography. In fact, the only thing by the end of the film that anyone knows about me is that I was born in 1977, grew up in California and happened to watch old war movies on a small black and white TV set that was first produced the year I was born. This handful of particulars is then associatively joined with recorded concrete images. However, the lack of information about a spectator can say a lot about what constitutes concrete particulars within that personal story, of playing the assigned role of spectator and consumer of objectified images of dislodged localities.

While birth may be something we are forced to take as a given in the words, deeds and documents of the world, memory as a lining of concrete particulars is quite something else.
Memory appears cut off from a referential and measurable linearity of objectified birth and death while it forms in the middle of the two poles of beginning and end, forming object permanence into a familiarity of our environment which is supposed to be an experience relatable through stories and often is not. *March 28, 1977* is ostensibly formed around the marker of my birth (without mentioning anything particular about it). However, it is my first memories, which revolved around watching images on a television set that involve if not a personal tale then personal memory.

As when in my video I pass six years into the future to recall watching an old war film on television, I remember one evening around 1983 watching floating and shifting images illuminating the dark room I was in. I somehow knew these glowing sonic flashes were from sometime around when I was born, a fathomless six years prior, prehistorical. I found it somewhat disturbing that something which had already passed was viewable again and that its recent pastness in that moment was more primordial than any sound image I knew to be much older than 1977. While I have remade these first impressions over and over again by continuous memory, even six year olds understand the illogic of the displacement of images through time. They even perhaps sagely doubt the obscurant mysticism of this literalist and objectifying (re)presenting of what has already passed through time somewhere out there in the world. The presence of these flashes of sound and light immovably moving there in a confined miniature of hardened, factual, recorded and concrete particulars in this glowing dumb box can transform the immediate world in which this box sits into something equally fathomless and opaque, something that can be recorded and temporally displaced into another box in another locality.
which without consent is transported to another space creating a nimble, mobile and fractal panopticon. ²⁸⁵

This was different than my already familiar experience of traveling to a movie theater, an environment designed specifically and exclusively to enable the hearing of amplified sounds and the seeing of floating rectangular images. In and through the smaller black and white box of the television set, these flashes of concrete particulars in light could make their pilgrimage to me and in so doing this immediate and intimate dark domestic space of the personal could become the most anonymously public. Rather than becoming a memory of autobiographical events, this memory became a memory of memory itself and its relationship with prosthetic and deceptive memory aids. If March 28, 1977 is the telling of a personal story, it is through this perspective, one that awkwardly became wrapped up with the modular nationalism I saw in that other domestic public space of newspapers now housed in microfilmic miniature in an increasingly antiquated and thoroughly officiated state archive literally housed right next door to where I live.

³.3.4 Nostalgia and Violence in Ephemeral Recordings for Purposes of Enduring Legacies

It is perhaps clear to see that March 28, 1977 is about reception of recording over space and time and that perhaps such recordings deterritorialize or at the very least dislocate place by presenting something as a location. Furthermore, the video touches on the point that chronologizing recordings further threatens to confound trajectories in repeating such recordings. Perhaps one can take this to be a personal or exclusively individual insight. Yet, the phenomenon of political reconciliation between Zimbabwe nationalists and the de facto state of

Rhodesia as an “international issue,” a phrase repeated in print and television at the time, shows how much location, particularly nationalism, can be an imagined community not just by local actors but by multiple transnational interests and anonymous spectators. This appears to ring particularly true in the late twentieth century as nationstates appear to be compelled into becoming mere consumers of a formula that has been fleshed out elsewhere over much longer periods of time.\textsuperscript{286} However, as Partha Chatterjee asks, if newer forms of nationalism, particularly in Asia and Africa, must merely choose their anticolonial resistance from given modular forms, what is left to imagine? How does anticolonial nationalism keep from being reduced to a caricature of itself?\textsuperscript{287} To this one could ask what the internationalization of specific national causes does to this sense of caricature? And what does the dubious nationalism of a white-minority state built on the notion of continuing the British Empire do to the notion of mimetic anticolonial resistance?

In the case of Rhodesia, as a cause juxtaposed to other more well-known Marxist Internationalist movements, anticolonialism is wrapped up in many specific contradictions. Such contradictions include: its specific relation to the British Empire; Rhodesia’s continuously porous migration to and from the territory as a self-governing colony and as a de facto if largely unrecognized state; its shifting legalities revolving around citizenship, subject and military conscription status; and sanctions imposed on it which often required it to pose not just as a suburb but as multiple countries of destination and origin for goods illegally entering and leaving the state.\textsuperscript{288}

As prime minister Ian Smith has repeatedly said himself, rebelling against Britain in unilaterally declaring its independence became a way of continuing the British Empire and its

\textsuperscript{286} Chatterjee, \textit{The Nation and Its Fragments}, 5.
\textsuperscript{287} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{288} White, \textit{Unpopular Sovereignty}, 29.
accompanying colonial project as Britain was giving up its colonies. The main political party, the Rhodesian Front, can be seen as more concerned with this relation with Britain in declaring its independence than with its protractible military conflict with anticolonial Zimbabwe African nationalists it hoped to prevent from achieving majority rule. By declaring its Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), the Rhodesian Front, which ruled over the short-lived white minority government from 1965-1979/80, could prevent the majority rule Britain demanded as a condition of bequeathing decolonization from on high to a territory demarcated by a series of governmental iterations. Such iterations included being a self-governing colony with its own military which was merged with Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland to form the Central African Federation after WWII as a means of creating a modernized industrial state similar to apartheid South Africa, a federation which could appeal to white immigration. The international appeal of nationalism for a Rhodesian cause compared to the differently international cause of Zimbabwe can be seen as a means of proclaiming membership in an empire which had ceased to exist by the mid-1960s or a West which had no national boundaries for a transient foreign-born white population with many passports, people who could just as easily become South African or British at a moment’s notice as many did in the late 1970s.\footnote{289}{Ibid.}

While these contradictions certainly fly in the face of anything straightforwardly modular about nationalism, let alone anticolonial nationalism, they do show the need for conditions of ad hoc interchangeability and equivocation in order to imagine a stable continuation necessary for a nationalist project marketed to whites from various other nations around the world. Such contradictions do not escape caricatures or tropes of belonging but rather rely on them. They seem necessary in order for Rhodesia to be one of many disappearing outposts of empire still available as a default dispersed postcolonial nationality of whiteness in a world whose relation to
both colonialism and nationality was rapidly changing by 1977. This can be seen in films the Information Ministry produced in the late 1970s for African and white populations within its borders and what it exported beyond.

Violence and nostalgia can become strange bedfellows and our reading of them together can depend on their social and aesthetic coupling through time. Films nominated for Academy Awards are often noted for how easily they, like pornographic films, leave general cultural memories. Though seemingly made and celebrated in order to last, there is nothing to guarantee their enduring transmission over time. Films made under the control of the Rhodesian Ministry of Information also have an odd relationship to enduring transmission and ephemeral communication. Many films meant to support an anxiously self-assured endurance of white rule in Rhodesia for a thousand years can be noted for their short cinematic and televisual life spans. One may normally attribute this to merely having lost the sporadic and ongoing war with Zimbabwe nationalists. Some of the more notorious films depicting horrendous scenes of destruction and in particular graphic bodily mutilation can be considered lost simply because they were destroyed, as has been already noted. Furthermore, one can see such short lifespans of the films, which appear to overcompensate in statements concerning strength and resolve to win the war, as evidence of a lost cause plain and simple, if not an awareness of it as well. However, all these readings point to deeper complexities of the life of the films Rhodesia produced in the late 1970s.

The existence of a newly named state is often a way for what has been produced before to disappear. It can also be a way for media to survive. As Mugabe and his ZANU-PF won the open elections of 1980, much of the country’s media personnel changed dramatically both racially and ideologically in the Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation (RBC), Rhodesian
Television (RTV), the *Rhodesian Herald* and many other media institutions. However, much of the media legally stayed the same such as keeping broadcasting under the control of the state and positioning it within the Ministry of Information.\(^{290}\) In addition, all materials which were created by the RBC were transferred to the newly named Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) after free elections in 1980. While news footage both staged and completely fabricated by the Ministry of Information under Rhodesia has not been readily consumed by general international audiences since the end of the white-minority regime, within Zimbabwe it has been recycled and politically reframed into historical documentaries packaged as “patriotic history” on Zimbabwe Television in the run up to elections. Such footage includes some of the more horrific footage, now framed as a continuous threat of control by imperialism. Innocent Chiampa Sithole has described such reframing as “the political commodification of the legacy of the liberation war.”\(^{291}\)

One of the more obvious ways the material produced in Rhodesia, including footage from the late 1970s, lives on is in the digital conservation and packaging of the footage as nostalgia and for archival preservation by white “Rhodies” living outside Zimbabwe. Memories of Rhodesia is an organization which restores, prints and uploads audiovisual material, selling many of its copies to academic and public libraries around the world. An online entity claiming to be the “Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation” (which *as a corporation* never left the state as the RBC changed to the ZBC) owns the licensing to specific films it won in a legal case in South Africa when it bought the specific material films from the Zimbabwean National Archives.

Both the production of some of the more grotesque films made under the Rhodesian Front by the regime’s military, Ministry of Information, Psy Ops and advertising executives and

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\(^{290}\) Moyo, “From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe,” 16.

the explicit destruction of some of those films by its archivists in the waning days of the regime can be seen as the government’s surrender of any belief in its ability to persuade audiences about the rightness of its cause.\footnote{Burns, \textit{Flickering Shadows}, 205.} The films themselves can be seen as a last ditch effort to intimidate the African population rather than patronize it (as both the Central African Film Unit and the Rhodesian Information Service had done for decades through its condescending education films). However, by 1975, the insular white-minority state started to impose the display of dead disfigured Africans (and some equally disfigured whites) on RTV to a white population “the size of a rock concert” as a means of boosting morale and resolve by showing the military’s “kill rate” and the threat of “Marxists terrorists.”\footnote{Frederikse, \textit{None But Ourselves}, 167-168.} This often produced contrary effects (as had always been the case with African audiences forced to watch such films) as many viewers complained about the moral reprehensibility of exploiting the death of Africans so that Rhodesians would “spare a thought” about the Rhodesian cause.\footnote{Ibid.}

It is well-known that the pseudo-documentaries produced by the Ministry of Information in collaboration with the military were often staged pitched battles with African soldiers (who as volunteers comprised up to eighty percent of the Rhodesian military) playing the aggressor terrorists. Speculation continues to surround the killing of African soldiers in order to film the mangled bodies of terrorist kill rates.\footnote{Nyarota, \textit{Against the Grain}, 66-69.} Such films were produced at the same the military accused ZIPRA and ZANU forces of attacking white Christian missionaries with many journalists and historians contending that these were also staged by the military itself.\footnote{Ibid}

Much of the government controlled operations designed to influence or persuade foreign opinion throughout the fifteen years of the state had never been effective as persuasion. Much of
the Ministry of Information’s publications such as *Rhodesian Viewpoint* and *Rhodesian Commentary*, the latter with an alleged 2.75 million copies in circulation in seventy-one countries were subscriptions held by members of the already converted, such as the Friends of Rhodesia and allegedly included a mailing list in the US of 173 libraries, 57 government officials (in a country which legally did not recognize the economically sanctioned state) and 64 press associations, all institutions which may have been more interested in keeping track of such information rather than interested in considering the case such publications presented as worthy of persuasive consideration. Indeed, the Minister of Information, PK van der Byl said that he, “wished to show the atrocities, absolutely and totally to the international press. I wanted those pictures to go out to the whole world.”

The production of such violent imagery can indeed be seen as a substitution of intimidation for persuasion in the wake of a “lost cause.” However, the destruction of many of these films along with documents about their production and distribution immediately after they were made points deeper to the conflicting hope of propaganda (a term the Rhodesian regime used consistently and without hesitation or irony), a hope that in being disposable transient communication propaganda can become enduring cultural transmission.

Such desires for endurance by ephemeral audiovisual means do not necessarily aim at making violence nostalgic, though they can appear to be. Productions such as the notorious and now lost “hyena film,” while staged, certainly does not aim at making violence nostalgic. Eyewitnesses claim that it was obvious that the film was staged as three men appearing to be guerrillas are seen being given food and shelter in a village before Security Forces spot their footprints, all the hallmarks of classic dramatic staging, not documentary. After radioing for

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297 Frederikse, *None But Ourselves*, 134.
298 Ibid., 95.
back up, a helicopter swoops down as soldiers jump out and kill the three men. A white soldier leads a hyena on a leash to the three dead bodies, as the hyena proceeds to devour the disfigured corpses. The head of the village denies knowledge of the “terrs” and is arrested. In pitch black the laugh of the hyena can be heard. Shown to African audiences, the film gave no title or credits. The film from eyewitness accounts does not appear to desire an enduring legacy of the rightness of the Rhodesian cause but rather exploits African tradition and allegory through violence.²⁹⁹

While this sort of intimidating propaganda, though obviously horrifying, perhaps needs to be compared to another film, What a Time (1978), which utilizes a sense of tradition of a white colonial pioneer spirit. The film was made in collaboration by the Ministry of Information, the military, the police and the RBC aimed at combining white pioneer myths with footage from the Elim Missionary massacre to tell a beginning-to-end history of the nation (1890-1978) in song. The songwriter, Clem Tholet, an advertising executive and son-in-law to Ian Smith said he wanted to convey “white Rhodesians’ feelings” of anger about the massacre which occurred and was immediately filmed the day he wrote one of the film’s songs, “Another Hitler.”³⁰⁰ The film tells a tale about the Rhodesian pioneer spirit overcoming odds to build the modern nation, filled with modular pictures of cattle and horse-drawn wagons, railroads, tobacco farmers, feed storefronts, automobiles, fedoras and skinny black ties, mini-skirts on the streets of a busy modern metropolis. Towards the end it cuts to images from the mission along with images of whites and blacks as part of a “multi-racial” society in hospital beds with missing limbs and black men with entrails hanging out of them. The film shows a clear trajectory from European entrance into a non-descript white space on a map to its given Western civilizational present.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.  
³⁰⁰ Ibid., 133.
While the film may have been made in a desperate attempt to encourage resolve for the future, it finds the need to do this by appealing to a past as being always and forever better than the present. And while the folksy danceable tune about a glorious past is awkwardly optimistic as it is juxtaposed to the horrific images of dismembered bodies, the sentimental refrain, “What a time it was…” (my emphasis) becomes a means of inverting its ostensible trajectory of time by allegorically making the future of this imagined past no longer possible. If the film is meant to harden resolve for a progressive trajectory for civilized standards, industrious capitalism and modern working telephones, along with a cause which was supposed to already exist for all time, it is not just the shock of the images but the logic of the rhetorical persuasion it hopes to convey which converts resolve into a semi-self-aware eulogy.

It is perhaps through the pseudo-documentary techniques used by various institutions of the Rhodesian state that one can approach the violence and nostalgia in some of the films nominated for Academy Awards in 1977. These films can appear less caught up in the hope of turning transient communication into an enduring transmission by being films incubated in systems of dramatizing specifically there for thoroughly sublimating past trauma by controlling it as fiction rather than as staged raw documentation. It is a well-known trope that many films that win Academy Awards are easily forgotten. Though many films may be incubated in Hollywood in hopes of winning an award, they easily become a brief success, critically, popularly or otherwise.

In *Marathon Man*, the protagonist, John Levy (much like the dual Edmund from *House of Hunger* and the RBC documentary) is a bookish New York City history student interrogated by vaguely CIA appearing men as he is caught up in a diamond smuggling scheme he (and the audience) vaguely understands. He is tortured by a sadistic Nazi dentist who has just come out
of hiding in an ostentatious villa somewhere deep in the generic jungles of South America.

Played by Dustin Hoffman, John appears passive and compliant as the white-haired dentist drills holes and rips out his teeth as the dentist had once done in Auschwitz. The film’s status is perhaps not only as fiction but as elevated fiction of an historic past that has been thoroughly aestheticized through institutionalized craft, discipline and control, including method acting. While the man playing Edmund perhaps was truly intimidated, scared or kept up for hours on end through interrogation, Hoffman as a method actor stayed up for days on end to appear disoriented and confused by his trauma which in the movie is supposed to stem from a previous generational trauma. It is not the familial trauma of his own personal obsession located in his father’s suicide during the McCarthy era, but one detached from his own particular life in the more globally referenced tragedy of the European Holocaust. As meticulously methodical fiction, the film can take on heightened fantasies of violence as cathartic and cleansing of the past.

However, the exploitable use of depicting someone else’s visceral real life pain by presenting it elsewhere does not necessarily render it entirely exploitable. The writer and producer of the CBS documentary, *Who’s Got a Right to Rhodesia?*, Irv Drasnin, started out his news journalism career as part of a CBS film crew which captured footage of police attacking protesters in the March on Selma in 1965. The footage has been endlessly recycled into US television documentaries and Hollywood fiction films about the civil right era. It was re-enacted in *Selma* (2019), a film which was nominated for but did not win an Academy Award for Best Picture in 2015. Sometimes the footage appears as a familiarizing mediascape for stories that merely take place during the time of civil rights without addressing Selma specifically. The footage as news journalism is famous for the way it could nationalize local injustices, extending
visibility. Beginning in the 1980s, the expansion of global communications networks will profoundly alter “the cycle of empathy for faraway victims” and the accountability humanitarianism will have for playing into the hands of actors whose goals are antithetical to or (perhaps more dangerously) irrespective of human rights.\textsuperscript{301}

One may dubiously compare the unself-reflexive and manipulative mixing of fact and fiction in horrific media spectacles such as the “hyena film” produced in late 1970s Rhodesia to certain notions of the essay film as such notions exist on paper. However, it is obvious that the films produced by the regime did not intend to reveal their constructed nature in such mixtures but rather seal them over.

CONCLUSION

A birth year is not memory. It is not heritage. It is not a neat and orderly collection of contentious pasts. It is not a personal story. A birth year is a mere interval in a system of timekeeping. Audio and visual recordings within a year’s interval have many of their own durations, durations I have assumed to be displaced things, to be fixed and frozen images of past processes that are repeatable, fixed displacements which become more opaque the more I imagine criteria that can render them as transparent verifiable developments or criteria that make them interpretable and not merely (displaced) durations.

1977 is an interval of a year in a calendar, a calendar which promises to be void of specifics, instead acting as a mere aid for imagined criteria from a verifiable reality, imagined criteria sometimes taken as memory. It is a year in a “homogenous empty time” of clocks and calendars, a form of time which appears to disavow having its own processual memory but nevertheless must cannibalize other memories to justify its existence as being the neutral measurement cosmologically detached even from the planetary cycles out of which this measurement system of secular and civic temporality emerged. Calling this system “Western” perhaps oversimplifies this process even as this “West” may have appeared in a more clearly delineated and internally coherent incarnation as a postwar trans-Atlantic master narrative in 1977 than it does now. This temporal system works with this spatialized and multi-placeless West in erasing imagined criteria which continuously make ever new claims to the West, against it or about it, even as this geographical system of temporal measurement itself claims to merely pinpoint such imagined criteria. To attach my overall video project or series of essay films to 1977 is to inherently attach it to a temporality which does not merely produce a grid to map chronologies but incorporates and demands chronologies often as emerging, residual, transient or
perpetual in various forms of immediate communication and in attempts at enduring transmissions.

The uneven repetition and recycling of audiovisual recordings in mediascapes as image-based narrative strips of reality based on criteria from imagined elsewheres confounds the mapping of homogenous empty time. It can turn the notion of archives as (official and ordered) repositories of what is no longer in transient circulation into one of making the permanent into an enduring ephemeral. Rhetorical formations can be said to always be enduring ephemerals. They are a matter of reconfiguring images into ever-new contexts through various antagonistic and cooperative social, communal or familial hierarchies and systems of connections.

However, since the 1970s, the availability of audiovisual recording, production, storage and distribution capabilities to overlapping publics and counterpublics, to consumers, neighborhood communities, artists, and cottage industries has exponentially and dynamically changed the scale and intensity of heteroglossia and speech genres. It has created recognitions of the interdependency of tradition and modernity, a modernity (or developmental modernization), which appears to destroy or at least primordialize what it has declared to be premodern irrational tradition. One may view the popularity and malleability of the term “postmodern” since the late 1970s as a reflection of this general recognition of interdependency between what is “outside” and what is “inside” the logisticalizing of cultural processes in the monetized and gift exchange of culture as idiosyncratic (self)performative images. This has taken place in institutions, regions and nationstates heavily invested in twentieth century centralized broadcast and cinema cultures or infrastructures. It has taken place in newly independent nationstates, which had sought to create and control their own centralized forms of control as national sovereignty against new colonizing realities. The availability and demand for audiovisual recording has
entered many urban and rural communities both within and without infrastructures of saturated mediascapes. It has been essential in the formation and consciousness for diaspora communities. This can contribute to the feeling of symbiotic nostalgias without memory where not only someone else’s past can feel like your future (or vice versa), but where multiple pasts and futures become displaced things forming new local indigenous criteria of imagined elsewheres.

Since the 1970s this form of nostalgia can be said to be less dependent on older center-periphery and one-way westernizations, which in their unforeseen defects have both conquered cultural traffic and have dissipated their trajectorisms in the havoc their temporal and spatial global ubiquity seems to have produced. Essay films have largely concerned themselves with the circulation of images of places overlapping with assumptions of centers and peripheries. They have attempted to convolute expectations of travelogues for assumed home audiences. They have attempted to rewrite the history of places by analyzing circulations of images in expansive mediascapes through participating in them. Though one can describe a certain linear development of the slippery genre as arising out of European print culture, histories by individual essay films can undercut histories of the essay film as a form.

Methods that cannot be so easily divided between the artistic and scientific are not employed by the essayistic to sentimentally valorize or romanticize the pre-categorical inquiries of children paradoxically indoctrinated into the essay as a tool for structured methodological thinking and storytelling in formal education. Rather they are employed to confront assumptions inherent within socializations, including the professionalization of knowledge into authority. Often for essay films this is complicated by such films’ focus on the logistics of imagified
culture that since the late 1970s is copied and pasted in evermore shifting combinations of informality and institutional practice.

Holistic, general and aggregate methods can be employed to inquire into conditionings that dubiously appear to create familiarity by creating trajectories. They can be used to question the status of trajectories of measured time as being neutral tools. Investigating globally expanding cultural and technological media practices in and since the late seventies itself assumes a chronology or series of chronologies, which a sequential calendrical system simply maps for imagined criteria. To address such an investigation assumes an unambiguous transparent reality which needs to be and can be contextualized. However, as this dissertation has attempted to show, the essay is an approach to, if not history or cultural memory, then to vestiges, vestiges which can compel us towards desiring context, that is, a retrievable context.

Essayistic approaches complicate assumptions about objectivity of context in documentary filmmaking. The essay offers the means towards storytelling about information, information that need not necessarily pass the moment of its newness. Non-methodological methods employed by the essay are approaches, which do not offer novelties for producing verifiable results. Nor do they offer reliable modes for novelty. They are not meant to be repeatable.

The remixing and recycling of previously existing audiovisual recordings based on a given year can appear to be based on a culturally homogenous and familiar archive or one which induces familiarity and imagined annals. Reconfigurations can appear to be unavoidably dependent on already existing chronologies in order to disrupt previous trajectories of imagined criteria as a way of rewriting histories as opposed to attempting to write them anew or simply over and over again. The reintroduction of recordings which were once ubiquitous to given
publics, recordings and publics which have since altered, vanished or merged with others can make long past and fixed recordings appear to unintended (since unknowable) future configurations of audiences all the more informational and squandered to their own moment. They can become reimagined as confounding documents of a past by simply being recorded for a duration in it.

Reconfigurations can promise underfamiliar and overfamiliar novelty as an antidote to plot-driven causality. They can also be given retrospective emplotments of evolution. Emplotments can also assume restorative pasts. They show up in attempts to define and contextualize the Golden Age of Porn. Emplotments can produce ideas of inevitable development and infinite comparisons as in the notion that the former Soviet Union was able to finally catch up to the simulated world of dynamic western capitalism or that the United States could see its twenty-first century neo- or late-liberal future in 1970s Brezhnev-era stagnation and Soviet uses of marginalized dead irony. Reconfigurations can also become the means by which we free ourselves from expectations of totalizing restoration or comparable inevitability by attempting to examine expectations of inevitability and assumption produced in hindsight.

The essay as a form of both socially imposed methodologies and a means to combat externalizing logic can be a way of being attuned to the inversion of the political positions of meaning formations over time. Recordings can make us aware of these inversions when they appear as blasts from the past, when they appear as unfamiliar anachronisms in surviving their own deaths by hiding away from public attention. They can remind us of our own transient and relative present and our own context, which is not universal or automatically translatable even if appearing to be repeatable with difference. The essay in audiovisual media can be the means by which we can attempt to address our assumptions about, cross and through time not as an
assumed solid ground against which change can be measured and divided against itself but as a story worth sharing.
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LECTURES, INTERVIEWS, PODCASTS AND SOUND RECORDINGS


