Archive Film Collage and the Mediation of Marginalised Places

Intro

I work at Derby, and I’ve very recently completed a part time practice led PhD. The context of the practice is within the intersection of Photomontage, Archive Film, Animated Documentary and Visual Effects.

I’ve been working with archive materials from the National Screen and Sound Archive of Wales to address the history and identity of the South Wales region.

The philosophical framework of the research is in critical realism, a position that sees reality as a stratified structure consisting of causal mechanisms that are not directly observable or detectable.

As it is too complex to be known empirically, reality can only be known conceptually. It is in responding to experience through theoretical mediation that we can come to know the ontological depth of the structures ‘underneath’ the empirical, visible surface of the world. This is a core premise, and aim, of critical realism.

The practice juxtaposes archive film elements in the spatial, as well as the temporal dimensions. This is premised on the claim that this mode of collage functions as a form of critical realist research, and that its process and outcomes are adequate to investigating and representing the non-empirical causes of historical events.

This aims to contribute to our understanding of the role of the experimental processes and creative intervention within emerging non-fictional platforms that negotiate history, and how it might mediate the past and reveal historical truths.

Within this presentation, I’ll talk about:

* Collage, montage and found footage film
* The politics of visual effects
* The problems of heritage
* Mediating and reanimating history
* (The balance of) The Factual and Mediated, the indexical and iconic
* (The concept of) Custodial aesthetics

Collage, Montage and Found Footage Film

Originating in the experiments of Braque and Picasso, collage has been recognised as part of modernism’s effort to destabilise formerly held notions of realism and the autonomy of the work of art. In the aftermath of the First World War, the development of collage within radical art movements ran parallel with a growing scepticism of authoritarian and institutional representations of the social world. The collage practice of artists like John Heartfield and Hannah Höch was dynamised by this movement, and sought to undercut images and narratives promulgated by power and authority. Part of their strategy was the deliberate foregrounding of the composite’s fabrication. The combination of fragments with their own original identities that pre-exist the composition is meant to be noticed. By highlighting its own construction, an aesthetic of discontinuity had a specifically political aim; interrupting and unmasking the deceptive surface of appearances.

This points to the status of collage as a specific philosophical principle, and not only or simply a practical method. A ‘philosophy of put togethers’ as Harold Rosenburg called it, with a particular position in respect of realism and politics. For Marjorie Perloff, it is ‘an important mode of theorizing and model building as well as art-making’ (1998). Budd Hopkins has situated collage as ‘not just a physical technique (…) but rather as a philosophical attitude, an aesthetic position that can suffuse virtually any expressive medium’ (1997).

As a form of political and social address, collage can cut against the reduction and simplification of the illusory whole of appearance forms by configuring the more stratified and complex world that critical realism describes. This echoes Bertolt Brecht’s technique of ‘ostranenie’ or ‘defamiliarisation’. A disruption to the ideological homogenisation that collapses the complexity of reality, and nullifies the recognition of social relations.

In building a theme or argument through the decontextualization and recontextualization of materials taken from different sources, found footage film is aligned with this principle. For William Wees, the process of structuring film elements according to an agenda independent of the original production, defines found footage films as a ‘cinematic versions of collage’ (1993).

As a key figure in the soviet montage movement, and as an early pioneer of found footage film, Esfir Shub’s work used existing images as factual material to pursue a political agenda through editing. The montage theorists argued that film had to be creatively assembled through post production in order to intervene in reality, revealing its social complexity. For them, film images obtain meaning through juxtaposition in an edited sequence. Through this, the causal relationships linking events recorded in film fragments are inferred by recontextualization. In the manipulation of what she called ‘authentic material’, the power of the image was mobilised through the creative treatment of ‘historical data’. Shub used her film practice to ‘rescue fact from oblivion and made it speak again in a new context’ (Chanan, 2007). Shub’s films recognize that the facts contained within recordings of historical events can’t offer direct access to an absolute or unitary truth. But within montage, they work to reveal the network of relationships behind events through the structure that she imposed.

The Politics of Visual Effects

In extending the language of found footage film through spatial layering, the practice uses digital compositing commonly used in visual effects, a post-production process with its roots in early photomontage and the photo manipulation. Historically, visual effects are used extensively in the sci-fi, fantasy and horror genres to generate illusory and imaginary phenomena. They are now also deployed across a wider range of productions to generate shots that are too expensive or impractical to photograph. Compositing usually aims to erase the independence and separateness of image components produced at different locations, at different times and using different methods. The borders of the components are obscured as they are subsumed into a seamless whole. A smooth, continuous and unruffled space is the explicit aim of this practice. The suppression of construction presents images that fail to provoke the active, critical engagement sought by the early pioneers of collage. Arguably, this drives the erasure of the political dimension within moving image cultures. Nea Ehrlich says that:

Once the aesthetics of representation are no longer perceived as aesthetics, they become transparent because the representation is read as if it were reality itself. This has important political outcomes since once representation is no longer seen as such, what is represented can be viewed as ‘real’ rather than cultural and constructed, thus making it ‘invisible’ and complicit with existing ideology (2021)

The Problems of Heritage

This logic is reflected in historical narratives that obscure their own contingency and production. In relation to Welsh history, Bella Dicks and Joost Van Loon argue that the presentation of history at the Rhondda heritage park narrates identity through a selective construction of a fixed industrial past. It works through ‘remembering certain traditions, events and origins and by forgetting their contingency, contestation or their embroilment in quite different narratives’ (1999). Here, the past is subject to what they call a ‘backward looking gaze’, projecting a unity that ignores how history has generated the complexities of the present. This promotes the past as fixed and complete, and not subject to our present conditions and knowledge. Through this reductionism, historical artefacts are disconnected from social context, ‘the tendency is for them to be severed of such associations and to serve, instead, as vehicles for the nostalgic remembrance of sentimentalized pasts’ (Tony Bennet, 1991). As Gramsci said, this is where ‘remembering takes the place of thinking’.

In analysing the ideological role of the heritage railways of North Wales, Dave Marks has argued for the recognition of the power relations operating in the production of historical narrative. He says the power to tell stories:

…lies in the hands of those who hold the material, those who research it and those who decide how and if it should be represented - which stories should be told, whose stories should be told (…) the script in the theatres of memories are written by the producers (1999)

Hierarchies and inequalities in the capture of the past can embed the colonisation of narratives by external forces. In this case, the unequal relation is between the English middle class who are the custodians of the railways, and the Welsh working-class that built the regions industry. Here, heritage becomes a vehicle that supports existing political structures, rather than a way for people to reconnect with their past in order to negotiate and understand their present. The sentimentalised past can obfuscate the realities of life for the subordinate people represented. In a British context, working-class culture is ‘often so mortgaged to the dominant culture that ‘the people’ are encountered usually only in those massively idealized and deeply regressive forms which stalk the middle class imagination’ (Bennet, 1988). This projects ‘attitudes *to* working people, rather than an attempt to reach, imaginatively, the feelings of their lives’ (R Williams, 1958), resulting in what Gwyn Alf Williams described as Welsh history with the Welsh left out.

To challenge essentialism, reduction, and the colonisation of representation, Welsh identity should be seen as the complex, plural, contingent and socially reproduced structure that it is. It is entangled with considerable internal tensions, contradictions and conflict that are integral to its composition. This shifts focus from the level of events, to the more fundamental causal forces that are the component parts of identity, in a move from what Steve Fleetwood calls ‘thin’ causality to ‘thicker’ explanations. This is the aim of critical realist research, the building of models that attempt to explain experiences by addressing what is beyond the visible, at what Roy Bhaskar called the ‘level at which things are really going on irrespective of the actual outcome’ (1975). As causal mechanisms are not empirically detectable, the realist explanation of events entails the simultaneous, interdependent interplay of facts and imagination. This is the condition for negotiating a reality that ‘cannot be observed, which has to be consciously discovered (…) not only by factual enquiry but by very complex interpretation, discovering all kinds of new systems and modes’ (R Williams, 2003).

The Factual and Mediated, the Indexical and Iconic

This has been worked through in a form of collage film developed as a practical system that balances and integrates the objective and subjective. In compositions that include photographic and indexical materials, an ontological realism is present in the status of the photograph as evidence of factual existence. Construction is present in the modification and juxtaposition of layers. In this way, the collage aesthetic negotiates a dialectic between the factual and the mediated. It is this tension that Perloff ascribes to the role of the collage fragment, she says ‘each element in the collage has a dual function: it refers to an external reality even as its compositional thrust is to undercut the very referentiality it seems to assert’ (1986). The factual force of the fragment pushes against the iconicity of the composition. Echoing the critical realist claim that observation and theory can’t be fully separated, Michael Chanan has stressed that iconic inferences operate through and around the indexical and denotative in all photographic images:

…in semiotic terms, this opposition between objective and subjective is false. The photographic image (...) is both index and icon at the same time: an automatic rendering of the scene and a pictorial resemblance full of associations and connotations (2007).

No index remains pure and untainted by iconic inflections. An image is immediately conceptualised and fused with the iconic as it is received. The indexical, the fact, and ‘the historical imprint’, are bonded with notions of truth through mediation. The truth of an image is a complex compound of the indexical record and the inferences conditioned in discourse.

Mediating and Reanimating History

In common with the pursuit of history as described by Hayden White, a ‘discipline that is empirical and speculative at one and the same time’, the intervention of collage abandons the objectivist pretence of naïve realism, but not the facts themselves. As Robert Rosenstone argues, the use of creative devices should not signal the rejection of analysis, rigour, and seriousness of intent, they should not be used *instead* of fact and analysis, they should be applied *along* *with* fact and analysis. Rather than collapsing into relativism, or abandoning fidelity to the real, ‘formal and aesthetic aspects are foregrounded to become the generative element that releases history as a force acting on the present’ (Skoller, 2005).

This force is the palpable link with a past that is causally connected to the present. Jaimie Baron has described the capacity of archive film to evoke a sense of continuity and contiguity in the emotional apprehension of past events. It closes the gap between the then and now, disrupting the distancing effect that renders people in the past as ‘other’ and unrelated to our present social conditions. It asks us to recognize that ‘“our” context “here and now” and “their” context “there and then” may be extremely similar’ (Baron, 2014). This has considerable political implications for our experience of archive film, particularly in its power to provoke empathy and identification. A response that Alison Landsberg has theorised as ‘prosthetic memory’, a social form of collective memory felt by people who did not directly experience the actual events. This more active and critical reception must to be activated by an explicit construction that recovers and reanimates its fragments. The mediation of the archive can work to connect us to a shared sense of political and cultural memory and identity, ‘an experience of historical knowledge as something that is constantly in transformation, rather than as a static artefact from the past’ (Skoller, 2013). This is an approach that Catherine Russell has called Archiveology: the process of ‘returning to the images of the past (...) and reviewing them for new ways of making history come alive in new forms’ (2018).

Custodial Aesthetics

Iwan Bala has said that ‘Wales, governed and dominated from the outside, shares with other marginalised cultures the need to salvage, to repossess a notion of authenticity’ (1999).

Bala has theorised this repossession as the production of custodial aesthetics, an art or media practice with a deep involvement with specific and particular places, history and people. This offers a visual, material custodianship of cultural memory, and its role in determining the identities of the present. I feel that the archival practice that I’ve described in this paper provides tools that enable and facilitate this aim. As the presence of the digital in emerging methods catalyses the reconfiguration and reanimation of factual materials, creative technologies can extend custodial aesthetics in ways that were not previously possible.

But this must be conducted with a sensitivity to the intrinsic prejudices and biases that can standardise and pacify their use. As Paul Wells and Jonny Hardstaff have cautioned - corporate, conservative agendas can lie at the heart of the tools we use to design, develop and deliver our work. This upholds a culture that conditions how they are used according to a presumption of how the world works. Tarleton Gillespie points out the fallacy that:

(technologies) hold out the promise of attaining progressive social goals, and of doing so effectively and without discrimination - a promise built upon the persistent belief that technologies exist outside the frailty and selfishness of human politics (Gillespie, 2003)

If we can interrogate, resist and circumvent its biases, the potential for digital imaging technologies to address and reveal the complexity of the social world can be maintained. Digital compositing can openly announce the constructedness of the aesthetic and the ontological distinction of the components combined. This rupture is engaged to open the technique to the possibility of political energies that the corporate realism of conventional visual effects denies. In this way, it can occupy ‘the realm in which such graphic rendition might make social forms available to knowledge’ (Leslie, 2014). In the antithesis of the reductionist and ideological suppression of complexity, this enables and supports revelation and visibility, fostering higher levels of awareness and understanding. In a parallel to Raymond Williams concept of ‘social extension’, collage can uphold and defend social complexity, reveal the diversity and plurality of social identities and history, and extend the scope and range of images that challenge reductions in regimes of representation.