Unmade, Unseen, Unreleased Film and Television, Sheffield Hallam University, 23rd and 24th May 2022

Picking up the Pieces: Archive Film and the Unseen Past

2900 words max

Title. Who I am.

Introduction/Context

(SLIDE) *The context of the practice is across Photomontage, Archive Film, Animated Documentary and Visual Effects. And it sits at the intersection between those fields and integrates their features.*

(SLIDE – Previous practice) *The practice combines archive and found footage elements in simultaneous spatial relationships. This is done within experimental documentary. The found materials in this work were gathered from the internet archive.*

(SLIDE) *I'm now working with archive materials from the National Screen and Sound Archive of Wales, and I'm dealing with history and identity of the South Wales region. The practice outcome will be a short, non-fictional collage film similar to this, along with the thesis.*

(SLIDE) *In reflecting on this, these are the areas that I'll be covering in the presentation.*

- Archive Film
- Critical Realism
- Evidence, Mediation and Montage
- Visual Effects and Spatial Montage
- Regional Identity and Politics

(1) Archive Film

(SLIDE) Despite the ambiguities of the term, it is generally agreed that archive and found footage film is a practice where pre-existing pieces of film or video footage from different sources are combined to produce new sequences and new meanings. For Williams Wees, unambiguous examples of found footage films not only contain found footage, but 'highlight that fact and make it one of the film's principal points of interest'. He argues that unlike the conventional documentaries that employ framing devices like 'titles, voice-over, contemporary interviews and talking heads' to anchor footage to a fixed historical interpretation, more critical method amplifies the open-ended, multiple meanings of footage. (SLIDE) This 'exploit(s) the instability of archival footage in order to open gaps, create ambiguities, challenge conventional readings of visual records of the past and undercut the usual narratives constructed to keep the meaning of archival footage in check'.
Within this approach, images retain the properties that identify them as belonging to a previous period, context and purpose. James Peterson suggests that the capacity of archive film to connects outwards, or point outside of itself, is conditioned by the

extent to which the separate identities of its components is foregrounded. In what he calls the centrifugal form of collage, the properties of recontextualization and juxtaposition address the socio-historical world. (SLIDE) As Wees has said, 'its significance cannot be enclosed within the borders of the work itself'.

(SLIDE) This outwardness activates what Jaimie Baron calls 'intentional disparity', an experience based on 'our perception of a previous intention ascribed to and (seemingly) inscribed within the archival document'. As the audience is aware that the film fragments were shot for another intention other than its use within a collage film, the disparity asks viewers to question why the footage has been re-used in the ways that it has, and for what political purpose.

Catherine Russel's reference to archaeology in her term *Archiveology*, indicates her interrogation of practice in relation to its status as a historiographical strategy. She places emphasis on the capacity of archive film in engaging with collective memories and history. (SLIDE) This sees found footage film as a way of 'returning to the images of the past (...) and reviewing them for new ways of making history come alive in new forms'.

(SLIDE) This provokes these questions:

If archive film points outwards, what exactly is it pointing to? And if history comes to life, what is being revealed that was previously hidden or unseen? And how is this being done?

In dealing with these questions, I've been trying to develop a theory of collage informed by the philosophy of critical realism.

(2) Critical Realism

(SLIDE) A central concept of critical realism is the division of reality into three domains that together comprise the whole of reality:

- The empirical domain
- The actual domain
- The real, or 'deep' domain

(SLIDE) A good analogy for this is an iceberg. The visible tip is the empirical level, and hidden under the water are the actual and the real. The causal mechanisms at the real or deep level interact to produce events in the actual level. Many observed events can be measured and recorded in the empirical domain. But many events in the actual go unobserved. The underlying structures in the real domain can't be accessed through direct perception. Phenomena in the real domain are transfactual, as they exist beyond their establishment as empirically detectable facts. As it can't be known empirically, the real can only be known theoretically and conceptually. It is in responding to experience through theoretical mediation, and the combination of facts and theory, that we can arrive at ontological depth.

(SLIDE) When it comes to research paradigms, there has been a traditional split between empiricism on the one hand and interpretivism on the other. Empirical realism claims that we can only have knowledge of what we can perceive, and that knowledge can directly capture and corresponds to reality free of human subjectivity

and values. (SLIDE) This reduces reality to the tip of the iceberg and denies what's below the water. Interpretivism claims that as we can't know reality outside of concepts, then all claims must considered equal. As this reduces reality to mental constructions, reality is swallowed up by subjectivity. (SLIDE) This won't acknowledge that there's an iceberg at all. (SLIDE) Critical realism has been developed to challenge this dualism in recognising that the complexity of reality, at the deep level, can only be known through the combination of facts and theoretical interpretation. (SLIDE) And through what we call judgmental rationality, we can and do have ways of adjudicating between competing claims and identifying which is the closest match to reality, whilst acknowledging that knowledge is fallible and subject to change. (SLIDE) Knowledge is fallible because truth isn't in our interpretations and representations, reality is the truth maker.

(3) Evidence, Mediation and Montage

(SLIDE) In applying this thinking to issues of film realism, the montage theory developed by the Russian Formalists says the camera records factual events, but creative intervention and shaping is needed in moving beyond the empirical level to reveal deeper truths unavailable to direct perception. Esfir Shub's archive film work operates according to this logic. Her filmic collage used existing images as factual material to pursue a transfactual argument through editing. The causal relationships linking events are inferred by recontextualization and construction. Esther Leslie says the 'connections between events and their interpretation were expressed through juxtapositions (...) The whole builds up (...) To watch a film by Shub was to watch reality pass by, moulded, made into concept and argument, a comprehensible concept and argument'. Through montage, they work to reveal the network of relationships behind the events through the structure that she imposed. The 'relationships between events' are the invisible, non-empirical mechanisms that cause things to occur in the world. A construction that addresses the causally generative level of reality can render a fuller picture that gets beneath the surface of facts.

(SLIDE) Here's an example from Ken Loach. In the context of the film, the cut between Bush and the plane attacking the presidential palace in Santiago during the Pinochet's coup, says something about the historical background of American interference in the region and the causal complexity of these events. (SLIDE) As well as being in the shots themselves, meaning and truth is within the interstitial space of the cut, and how it models a deeper reality in our imaginations that can infer the non-empirical causes of events. Mike Wayne has connected that to Walter Benjamin's idea of the dialectical image. He contends that the editing process 'attempts to make concrete an idea or set of thought processes which are not already evident within the shots themselves but exist only in the juxtaposition of the shots'. My claim is that non-empirical causes that generate events are the primary referent of montage. The inference that montage employs is a causal inference, and its aim is contact with the deep domain of reality.
(SLIDE) Zooming in on that cut, the interstitial space, is where we get at the ontological depth at the bottom of the iceberg

(SLIDE) In reference to the semiotics of archive film, Michael Chanan identifies the simultaneous, dialectical relationship between the iconic and indexical. Echoing the claim that empirical observation and theory can't be separated, he stresses that the iconic inferences that operate through and around the indexical and denotative don't

nullify the evidentiary status of the image. (SLIDE) 'The pposition 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'. No index remains pure and untainted by iconic inflections. Images are immediately conceptualised and are fused with the iconic as they are received. This is not a collapse into relativism, but an acknowledgement of the concept laden interpretation of all images. Through connotation, we imagine the causal content of an image and position it in a conceptual frame. From a critical realist perspective, within the dialectic between the factual and connotation, the movement from concrete to abstract and from the particular to the general shifts representation from the empirical and actual towards the deep domain of the real. Through 'associations, nuances and undertones' the 'level at which things are really going on' is rendered.

(4) Spatial Montage

(SLIDE) *What I'm doing specifically in the practice is working through how inference works within spatial, as well as temporal relationships.*

I'm using a rotoscoping method to extract components from the footage. This is through a visual effects technique that animates shapes to cut out moving elements from the surrounding frame.

Then I'm bringing them together in collage composites through digital compositing.

Through this, what I'm investigating is how the interstitial meeting points between layers within spatial relationships can work as a method for modelling the level of the real, as a form of causal inference. But for this to happen, the practice has to work against the grain of the visual effects methods used.

(SLIDE) Historically, visual effects are used extensively in genre cinema to generate illusory phenomena. They are now deployed across a wider range of productions to generate shots that are too expensive or impractical to photograph. Many films now include some use of effects, and their presence in film images is more difficult to detect. In most productions, the goal of visual effects in is the integration of film and computer-generated elements to render convincingly realistic, 'lifelike' images. Digital compositing usually aims to erase the independence and separateness of image elements produced at different locations, at different times and using different methods. The borders of components are obscured as they are subsumed into the new whole. A smooth continuous, unruffled space is the explicit aim, producing a seamless realism that obscures the construction of the composite image. The suppression of construction presents images that fail to provoke the active, critical engagement sought by the early pioneers of collage. Nea Ehrlich has argued that this has driven the erasure of the political dimension within moving image cultures. (SLIDE) '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'. Under conditions that promote the homogenisation of reality, the critical, questioning operation of collage is extinguished as its dialectical capacities are suppressed. With its incorporation into the orthodoxies and determinism of corporate image making

cultures, (SLIDE) 'what was once a revolutionary technique is now the staple of advertising and greeting cards' (Perloff, 1998, p. 387).

A critical, and political, approach to images is a necessary condition for collage that is concerned with addressing the external, independent reality it negotiates. It must be centrifugal in its use of materials in order to analyse and reappraise the historical and social significance of its parts. Deliberately obscuring the boundary between layers fails to generate the contact points that must be present for inference towards the deep domain. This is a mode of practice related to what Lev Manovich terms 'spatial montage' in his analysis of digital compositing techniques. Compositing can be used within and aesthetic that openly displays its constructedness and the distinction of fragments combined. (SLIDE) 'Although digital compositing is usually used to create a seamless virtual space, this does not have to be its only goal. Borders between different worlds do not have to be erased; different spaces do not have to be matched in perspective, scale, and lighting; individual layers can retain their separate identities rather than being merged into a single space, different worlds can clash'.
The spatial collision of layers has a rhetorical potential of its own. (SLIDE) Benjamin described the potential for the dialectical image to transcend linear, diachronic representations of history. 'Then and the Now come together in a constellation like a flash of lightning (…) the relation to the Then and Now is dialectical: *not temporal* in nature but *imagistic*'. The site of this flash is in the interstices of collage that evoke the transfactual powers that connect events. Here, in the formal features of collage, the material contact point at the overlap of layers can birth the conceptual collision of social forces. (SLIDE) Donald Kuspit has said that 'collage (…) is very much about these dark fringes, these absences, as well as about the positive presence of positively apprehended fragments. The informal fringe and the formal assertion of substance exist side by side in the collage, subtly mingling to generate its energy'.

(SLIDE) *Filmmaker Mark Cousins has asked this question - Can films think? What I'm trying to illuminate is the ways in which this form of film collage thinks in purely visual terms, and what this can tell us about reality and history. And I think that's quite a nice way of seeing practice-based research in general, asking how our practice thinks, in whatever form it takes.*

(5) National Identity and Politics

(SLIDE) What my practice is thinking about is the identity of the South Wales region as a part of non-empirical reality. Informed by theories of Welsh social and cultural life, critical realism's view of causal mechanisms and social ontology is applied to the conceptualisation of identity as a socially reproduced structure. Following Benedict Anderson's exploration of national identity as an 'imagined community', the work investigates Welshness as what Mike Wayne calls a 'structured but composite formation'. This presents identity as comprised of overlapping, and conflicting, elements. (SLIDE) He says that, 'when we dig further into the component parts of an identity we often find that while they may be held together within the force field of a broader framework, there may be considerable tensions or even contradictions between the component parts'. A collective identity is a composite of parts that have different causal mechanisms. The intersection of multiple mechanisms is the site of the formation of identity as a layered structure. The investigation of stratification, worked through in the praxis of collage, aims to render a 'complex prismatic account' of Welshness that penetrates beneath the surface of reductive appearances. As

Raymond Williams has said, 'it is this living complexity which we must come (...) to understand, to possess, and to work with', as a static and flattened history will leave us 'adrift of ourselves'. Specifically, my work with the archive will aim to confront reductive accounts that frame the history of the South Wales region according to the mechanisms of capitalist economics. This narrative asserts the inevitability and linear causality that determined the destruction of the regions industrial base, and neglects the consequent human cost of deteriorating communities and local cultures. (SLIDE) Recently, the effects of economic and social conditions have been fetishized through colonised representations of the Welsh working class in reality shows like these. In a challenge to the institutional violence that I feel these programmes support, representation can work to uncover power relations and political agendas, lend voice to the relatively powerless, and connect audiences with a shared, social sense of political and cultural memory and identity.

To sum up and conclude with Raymond Williams, (SLIDE) I feel this can provide us with the 'necessary access to things that are indeed our common life but which are not accessible by means of direct observation and experience. (...) which *cannot be observed*, which has to be consciously discovered. New characteristic social relations which have, in a sense, to be discovered, *not only by factual enquiry* but by *very complex interpretation*, discovering all kinds of new systems and modes.