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Time Out: An exploration of the possibilities for archived time-based media as a tool for exploration within a fine art practice-based research enquiry

ABSTRACT

An increasing number of contemporary artists such as Christian Marclay, Douglas Gordon and more recently Oliver Laric have been utilizing, plagiarizing and re-appropriating film sourced from digital moving image archives since the early 1990s. This has been made possible through the relatively new cultural landscape created by a growth in accessible technologies for experiencing and handling film content. There have been a number of significant collectors who have released materials free from copyright (under the Creative Commons classification), and, subsequently, there has been a dramatic increase in the availability of source material archived and accessible from the Internet. Specifically, and especially pertinent to this reflection, is what has become commonly termed as the sponsored or 'orphan' films.

KEYWORDS

détournement
re-appropriation
archive-art
orphan films
digital platforms
installation-art QR
codes

This article is primarily concerned with my evolving arts practice and my current research enquiry exploring the appropriation of meaning and interpretation in pre-authored didactic film narratives. Each experiment starts with a period of searching, of collecting and harvesting instruction and information films. These resources are assembled into archives of found and 'orphan' film footage that will provide material with which to speculate. The research approach depends on discovery and serendipity as much as procedural methodology. There are two primary tactics: the reconstruction of narratives plus the reconfiguration of interpretation and meaning by altering the space and site for viewing. Chance, algorithms and detached systems are devices that rupture, reorder and re-present narrative through the editing process. Equally significant is the disruption of audience reception and readership through the manipulation of context, location and alternative media platforms. My purpose is to use creative play as an interrogative strategy that both deconstructs and re-evolves content and therefore disrupts linear time (narrative).

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary research practice within the visual arts has been characterized by debates surrounding issues that include experiential knowledge (Dewey 1934), reflective practice as a means of understanding processes including experiential learning (Schön 1983) and the relationship between tacit and experiential knowledge (Barrett 2007). An added dimension for visual arts research is the digitization and documentation of visual outputs, ideas, experiences and activities, resulting in a bewildering amount of source materials through the creation of numerous new archives, taxonomies and collections. This in turn has led to a shift in artistic practice that opens up possibilities for new collaborations, multiple platforms and a broadening of knowledge through diverse approaches. More than ever before, artists are faced with a variety of source materials with which to develop new methods for making. Lily Diaz (2011) describes this new landscape:

The resulting caesura is not a clean slate from which we can easily siphon pristine deposits of data. Rather, we are confronted with a fractured continuum of multi-sensorial, multimodal and multifaceted yet-to-be 'data' in the need for further processing.

Drawing on both Diaz' description of a digital world that creates infinite possibilities and the notion of visual arts research as being embedded within experiential learning, I have developed an arts practice that encompasses a variety of research methodologies and arts processes, rooted in time-based media and utilizing indeterminacy, chance and the manipulation of meaning through location and contextual display.

Deleuze (1995) has stated that the artistic question for artists is no longer 'what can we make that is new?' but 'how can we make do with what we have?' To put it another way, how can we utilize and make sense of the numerous images, stimuli and resources that are ever present in our modern times? Artists working with pre-existing forms bypass the modernist ideology of originality in order to manipulate and re-present the masses of data and forms that languish in databases, collections, serendipitous corners and chance encounters – everywhere and anything has potential for re-appropriation. This practice in turn generates a process that becomes

an integral part of the work. The viewing of and search for archived/found footage has become a central element of the process. The reuse of a range of artefacts, moving images, objects and still images infers a continuous process of searching and collecting between eras, genres, countries and ideologies that becomes an integral part of the artistic process. The sketch-book traditionally used by artists becomes digitized as a series of digital bookmarks, downloaded software and file storage, forming a new cartography for production.

The literary and artistic heritage of humanity should be used for partisan propaganda purposes [...]. Any elements, no matter where they are taken from, can serve in making new combinations [...] anything can be used. It goes without saying that one is not limited to correcting a work or to integrating diverse fragments of out-of-date works into a new one; one can also alter the meaning of these fragments in any appropriate way, leaving the imbeciles to their slavish preservation of 'citations'.

Debord and Wolman ([1956]2006)

Working with pre-existing forms as primary sources for the production of artworks is, of course, nothing new. Ever since Duchamp's submission of his work titled *Fountain*, a urinal turned upside down, to the Society of Independent Artists exhibition in 1917, leading to the development of ready-mades and experiments with found objects, artists have been fascinated with the subversion of pre-existing forms. Artists Joseph Cornell and Salvador Dalí were using found film footage as early as in the 1930s as were filmmakers such as Woody Allen, whose first film *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* (1966) consisted entirely of footage from a Japanese spy film re-edited with rewritten dialogue.

The reuse of moving images, sourced from digital archives, is then at the forefront of current re-appropriated artistic practice. An exhibition in 2010 at Manchester's Cornerhouse cinema and arts complex titled 'UnSpooling: Artists and Cinema' (Cornerhouse, 2010) brought into focus some of the relationships that artists have with cinematic aesthetics, narratives and processes. Some complex, some simplistic and others baffling, the exhibition provided the audience with artist films that ' "never existed in reality," despite their historical relation to the archive of cinema' (Harbord 2010). Dave Griffiths (2010) in his essay published in the exhibition catalogue states:

After enduring decades of fractured observation and remixing (in collage, cut-ups, sampling) now film images are somewhat embedded as open source materials in contemporary art practice, along with the staple concerns of re-siting the cinema event and repurposing the audiences function.

Appropriation art and post-production is the practice of exploring, collecting, archiving, manipulating and reusing huge amounts of visual material produced by popular culture and advertising. This mode of production, which started with Duchamp, continues to be explored by the Internet generation including artists who continue to develop contemporary artistic processes and methodologies that include the creation of personal archives, often plundered from existing archives.

'ORPHAN' AND SOCIAL GUIDANCE FILMS

Orphan film: a motion picture abandoned by its owner or caretaker

The exploration of creative possibilities for time-based media as a tool for exploration within my arts practice is embedded within a digital, cultural landscape that includes the collection of source materials from a range of accessible film archives.

Instrumental to my studies is the Prelinger Archives founded in 1983 by Rick Prelinger in New York City. The online archive, at the time of writing, holds more than 2000 social guidance and 'orphan' films. In 2007, he also published 'The Field Guide to Sponsored Films', which describes 452 films commissioned by businesses, charities, advocacy groups and state or local government units between 1897 and 1980.

The accompanying Prelinger Library in San Francisco, California, describes itself as 'an appropriation-friendly, browsable collection of approximately 40,000 books, periodicals, printed ephemera and government documents'. Prelinger was instrumental in coining the term 'orphan films', and in organizing the Open Content Alliance, ensuring through this action the existence of copyright-free materials and their availability for artists, film-makers and researchers to use and reuse to create new outputs and content.

Social guidance films have been around as long as films' existence. From the earliest years of cinema, motion pictures have been produced to record, orient, train, sell and persuade. Though it is estimated that 300,000 industrial and institutional films have been made in the United States – far more than any other type of motion picture – the film type is little investigated. Almost every major company, national business association and educational institution produced or commissioned titles intended for staff, customers or the public. Today these films are valuable both as documentation of past places, events and practices and as examples of changing styles of rhetoric.

Compared to traditional emotive reaction to fictional narratives, the interpretation or response to instructional films, though, poses a problem for modern viewers. These films are mostly from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s and are therefore more likely to be viewed as historical documents; the attitudes and social norms outlined in the films are outdated and often humorous or shocking in their naivety to modern audiences. For instance, a film titled *Boys Beware* (Davis, 1961) outlines the dangers of homosexual men to young boys. The film shows astounding ignorance in its portrayal of homosexual men as dangerous predators. As one boy takes a short-cut to avoid walking alone next to a man who had previously been in the public restroom, the narrator announces, 'Bobby made a wise decision; it may have saved his life'. Similar sensationalist attitudes include the proclamation 'One never knows when the homosexual is about. He may appear normal and it may be too late when you discover that he is mentally ill'. The film is viewed by contemporary audiences with the knowledge that we are now more enlightened, highlighting our (perhaps) socially accepting society rather than situating the film within the context of its original, seemingly less informed, time frame. *Boys Beware* now only serves to remind us of our supposed superior moral status achieved through the progression of time. The original message then for more enlightened modern audiences exists in a temporal space that lies somewhere between fact and fiction, past and present.

What we are seeking, in substance, through our religious accumulation of personal accounts, documents, images and all the 'visible signs of what used to be', is what is different about us now; and we are hoping to find 'within the spectacle of this difference the sudden flash of an unfindable identity. No longer a genesis, but the deciphering of what we are in the light of what we are no longer'.

(Pierre Nora quoted in Marc Augé 2008: 21)

Augé's assumption is that by examining materials that document the way life used to be (i.e. archives), we are undergoing a personal quest to comprehend our states of being by comparison to the past. The following case study is concerned with using original source material that directly positions itself as an authority on correct 'states of being'.

TIME OUT

Time Out illustrates my preoccupation with the disruption of meaning (narrative), through the altering of original moving image and contexts for viewing. The work's starting point, a social guidance film, was produced to convince the US population in the 1960s to exert some control over their emotional state or otherwise they would cause an accident. This 1961 safety film, *Time Out for Trouble* (Glidden), is the epitome of suburban horror. Housewife Jane is tormented by a clock in her home that was a gift from her mother-in-law. The clock initiates accidents and then blames the victims for 'letting their emotions run away with them', the underlying message being that emotionally volatile situations often result in accidents, because when people act irrationally they ignore the safety precautions that they would usually follow.

Shot in black and white, the original film, despite its oddness, has some aesthetically and conceptually interesting moments; weird, ghostly sound effects give the film a surreal air, as do the constant 'visions' that Jane has about the haunted clock; close-ups highlight the main protagonists without revealing anything of their true character; and the non-linear sequence of events creates an atmosphere that is disjointed and ultimately portrays a series of non-related events that share one common message – 'Take control of your emotions'.

Taking on board the idea that social guidance films such as *Time Out for Trouble* exist as a kind of moving image rule book for society and following Michael Polanyi's notion that 'no solution to a problem can be accredited as a discovery if it is achieved by a procedure of following definite rules' (Polanyi 1958: 123), *Time Out* was created using a system of controlled chance that necessitated the removal of emotional decision-making, thereby simultaneously exploiting and subverting the film's original message. The intention for making was the creation of a film using non-traditional processes of editing (indeterminacy and randomness) with an aim to discover new associative combinations. The seductive notion of discovery without rules as an artist is a very attractive prospect but in attempting to steer away from traditional rules I just created different criteria for making – new rules. Perhaps a more accurate statement in relation to artistic methodologies would be that no solution to a problem can be discovered unless the future is non-defined.



Figures 1 and 2: Stills from film *Time Out* (Clements, 2009). Images copyright: Jo Clements 2009.

The rules were as follows:

1. Each camera shot was isolated and cut to create a series of individual clips.
2. Every clip that showed more than one person or interaction with another person was deleted.
3. Each remaining clip (76 in total) was assigned a title.
4. The titles were listed alphabetically and assigned a number accordingly (1–76).
5. The numbers were printed out ten times each and placed in a box.
6. The numbers were pulled out of a box and placed in order – 76 numbers were randomly chosen three times, to create three separate film sequences.
7. The clips were reordered according to the order that they came out of the box to create three separate films, which were then placed together to form a silent three-way split-screen triptych.

If narrative is to be understood as ‘the representation of an event or a series of events’ (Abbott 2002), then the re-editing of this film can be understood as representing a fractured or disrupted narrative, at least in relation to the original film’s intent. However, as a film in its own right, it has a particular narrative, albeit one that relies on the audience to construct their own meaning. By presenting a series of clips simultaneously that exist outside of familiar temporal sequences, that are disjointed, are reiterated and consist of different lengths, the audience is forced to construct their own meaning from a series of clues and hints. Bordwell (1985) suggests that this process is

The imaginary construct we create progressively and retroactively, the developing result of picking up narrative cues, applying schemata, and framing and testing hypotheses.

DECIPHERING THE TRUTH

The conception of narrative processing positions the audience member as an active participant and defines reading or viewing as an active process that occurs in real time. The viewer constructs or realizes the story from a sequence of visual clues that may or may not be real or fake and could be designed to function as either education or propaganda. This is explored in greater detail, within the realm of artistic process, by presenting a set of indeterminate and unrelated set of visual clues within the context of a gallery space.

In recent politics, rhetoric such as New Labour's 'Third Way' or the current conservatives' 'Big Society' follows in the footsteps of a long tradition of organizations and governments that wish to change, or more often re-enforce, collective behaviours and attitudes through the use of public information campaigns that utilize moving images to reach a wider audience (Severin and Tankard 1988). A number of short films have been shown on British television that encourage social responsibility, a particular example being the recruitment campaign for the National Citizen Service, utilizing linear fictional narrative devices, in the form of young people rapping about the benefits of joining the service, in order to normalize the messages being delivered. The campaigns straddle a divide between education and propaganda, by encouraging young people to participate in the scheme, while simultaneously presenting the campaign's broader aims – to legitimize the concept of the Big Society.

Richard Taylor (1979) has defined the difference between propaganda and education in the following ways: education teaches people how to think while propaganda teaches them what to think; information offers people opportunities, propaganda tells them how to use those opportunities; propaganda narrows perspective, information broadens perspective; education is concerned with opening minds, propaganda with closing them; education leads to questioning, whereas propaganda aims to create acceptance.

There is then some tension between what is presented as education or defined as propaganda. This conflict is further exploited in my work 'Resuscitation' (2011).

Resuscitation begins with a USSR film from 1940 that appears to show dogs being resuscitated from the dead. Portrayed as a scientific experiment, the film has a number of shocking moments, including what appears to be a severed dog's head brought back to life, and it is unclear whether the film is an authentic portrayal of an experiment, a reproduction of previous experiments or a complete fake.

Presented as part of a larger installation, the film is projected alongside a series of objects and texts including medical equipment, dog silhouettes, Russian medical texts and random excerpts from novels. Following on from my previous explorations into narrative disruption, this body of work places together disparate objects that in reality have no relationship to each other but, placed in a gallery setting, force the viewer to construct new narrative and meaning. The images, objects and texts are displayed in a similar way to museum exhibits (a reference to the film's archive status). The only clue to the work's purpose, as a puzzle or problem to be solved, is in the graph paper that the work has been mounted on, which is traditionally used to work out and map solutions to problems.

The semiotic value of objects and images as displayed in this work is altered: their original meaning deferred to the newly constructed narrative.



Figures 3 and 4: Installation views of 'Resuscitation', Camille Claude Gallery, Clermont-Ferrand (France), 2011. Photographs copyright: Jo Clements 2011.

Extracting images, objects and texts from their original narrative detaches them from context, thereby removing the original authors' intent for emotional impact or contextual understanding. According to John Dewey (1934), art in essence requires the application of intelligence as opposed to random, disassociated thoughts or feelings; it derives from the ability to recognize relationships among elements, to create meaning. He states that perception is the

recognition of relationships: 'the action and its consequence must be joined in perception. This relationship is what gives meaning; to grasp it is the objective of all intelligence' (Dewey 1934).

The contiguity of the objects in the work, the associations that their proximity presents to the mind, is pivotal to the reading of this work. There is a great deal of deception occurring: the film itself has ambiguous readings; the objects look connected to the film but are not; the text is stolen from a number of different sources but appears to be connected; the Russian text leaves non-Russian-speaking viewers to feel as if they are missing a vital piece of information that might make the work making more sense. In short, the work leaves space for doubt while presenting elements and combinations that could equally create moments of fictional narrative which the viewer might be fooled into thinking are an approximation of understanding; what Laura Mulvey (2006) describes as the 'aesthetic of deception, an appeal to the human mind's pleasure in illusion and its constant readiness to be fooled'.

Experiential engagement with a collection of artefacts and subsequent reading relies on tacit knowledge and levels of realism that the viewer is already familiar with. Without any points of reference the work would be meaningless to all. It is also reasonable to suggest that engagement with a set of potential points of references infers authenticity. Psychological research has been carried out that illustrates how in fictional texts the reader initially treats scenarios as real rather than false. Understanding and acceptance are thought of as the same process, whereas disbelieving requires additional mental resources (Gilbert 1991). Gilbert (1991) concludes that 'people are credulous creatures who find it very easy to believe and very difficult to doubt'.

LOCATION AND AUDIENCE RECEPTION

More than ever before we live in a multi-platform society, one in which we are surrounded by opportunities for viewing the moving image. Television, cinema, outdoor broadcast screen, advertising digital screens, mobile projectors, mobile telephones, digital tablets, galleries, museums or computer monitors, all can suggest a certain relationship between the mind and body of the spectator and the screen (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010). In addition, digital platforms, social media and virtual worlds suggest other means for the reception of the moving image and therefore possibilities for new readings and interpretations. Mulvey (2006) states:

Once the consumption of movies is detached from the absolute isolation of absorbed viewing (in the dark at 24 frames a second, in narrative order and without exterior intrusion), the cohesion of narrative comes under pressure from external discourses, that is, production context, anecdote, history.

Two recent artworks, 'Secret Places/Secret Spaces' (Jo Clements, 2012) and 'The Garden of Good Advice' (Jo Clements, 2012), sought to experiment with digital platforms, namely by producing contemporary public information films, written and produced by school groups and displayed alongside original 1950s and 1960s social guidance films via QR code installations. Each project had as its main focus a reliance on mobile media platforms to access the film works. The intention was to try and understand how pedagogic narrative can be affected by locations and methods for viewing by

situating these films that are inextricably rooted in a distant time and place, within contemporary settings.

In this instance the importance of grouping films within an installation space, as opposed to the screening of one film within a space, is a direct response to contemporary notions of simultaneous broadcast. Burgin's notion of 'imbricated time' serves as a metaphor in this instance that describes a non-linear conceptual intertwining of meanings, images and messages originating in both historical and contemporary time but existing (equally) in readily accessible digitized forms where meanings overlap, images are reproduced, iterated and reinterpreted.

An assembly of simultaneously present events, but whose separate origins and durations are out of phase, historically overlapping. This is the imbricated time of our global lived space.

(Burgin 1985)

Each artwork consisted of a number of QR codes placed within a setting: Secret Places/Secret Spaces occupied an area of little known woodland within the urban sprawl of Salford and The Garden of Good Advice occupied a space within a public corridor in MediaCity at Salford, the site where the BBC has relocated many of its departments to.

There is a strong ethnological tradition of the notion that culture becomes localized in space and time. By introducing elements from a different culture and time into an alien environment, where they have no place or context, the films took on a new resonance. Already accessible from digital archives and therefore easily viewed on computer or locative media, the presentation of the



Figure 5: Installation view. Secret Places/Secret Spaces, Jo Clements, 2012. Photograph copyright: Jo Clements 2012.

films within both a woodland setting and a modern, steel-and-glass environment allowed for individual interpretations in response to the location.

Yvonne Zimmerman illustrates how the presentational context of an information film can affect its reading and interpretation. Using an example of a German film about the manufacture of a distinctive smelling cheese, she recounts how different environments affected different responses:

if shown at an advertising event organised by the Milk Commission, it was screened as ‘propaganda film’ [...] if screened in cinemas, it became a cultural film on life in the Alpine pastures; and when projected in the classroom and commented on by a teacher, it was an educational film.

(Zimmerman 2009)

Traditional feature films are more generally made purely for entertainment purposes and sought by media users as sources of intrinsically rewarding emotional experiences. According to Oliver and Bartsch, films made for purposes of information, status enhancement or social interaction (Rubin 1983) are not readily explained in emotional terms and are therefore often considered to fall outside the realm of entertainment. Audience responses to watching the films via locative media, in unexpected settings, however, elicited a very different response: partly due to their being rooted in a different time and place and therefore somewhat outdated but also through the playful mechanisms in which the films could be viewed. The process of accessing the films became the entertainment within this context and environment.

I decided not to give any indication of the films’ content, preferring then to leave them hiding behind the QR codes. I wanted to create a level playing



Figure 6: Installation view. Secret Places/Secret Spaces, Jo Clements, 2012. Photograph copyright: Jo Clements 2012.



Figures 7 and 8: Installation views. The Garden of Good Advice, Jo Clements, 2012. Photograph copyright: Jo Clements 2012.

field for discovery if you like. Without any prior expectations, the audience had the opportunity to stumble across interesting content; I wanted to play with notions of chance and indeterminacy in a different way to that which I had explored in the editing of *Time Out*. The absence of any didactic or pre-prescribed formula of any kind for viewing the work meant that the audience had the freedom to become absorbed in the new – to discover old materials as something new. As a private experience, it provided an introduction to new forms in an unexpected environment.

CONCLUSION

The original film-makers' intent for the films used as source materials for my work was to inform, instruct, educate and ultimately control. The complete subversion of these films' original didactic or propagandist intent has altered their meaning and purpose to one that invites the viewer to question rather than accept, challenge authenticity, construct new narrative, create tension, rupture experience and interrupt semiotic readings.

A recent presentation that I delivered to an audience at the Menders Symposium held in the beautiful but remote surroundings of a farm in the Lake District consisted of a compilation of films that demonstrated a variety of states of brokenness. Made exclusively for the symposium, the selection of clips from ten separate 'social guidance' films made in the 1940s and 1950s were compiled to create a film that posed the question, 'what have we become?' Titled *The Terrible Truth*, the film deliberately included scenes that had some contemporary relevance; political and social issues, drug abuse, attitudes towards homosexuality, medical advancements, the destruction from war, personal responsibility and economic downfall were all presented in a cold barn on an isolated farm to an audience whose main concern was with the act and theories of mending. The mending theme is significant here. These were films originally made with an aim to mend society, whether through education, propaganda or instruction; they all exist because somebody somewhere wanted to change attitudes and/or behaviour.

The term mending implies a reworking of existing materials in order to either increase the functionality of an object or restore an object to its original state.

The boundaries between previous notions of originality and creation, and the use of forms that are already loaded with their own cultural boundaries, signifiers and histories, are becoming increasingly blurred by artists who select, edit and disrupt existing work to create new meaning and narrative. Through the disruption of narrative forms, re-staging of scenarios and 'borrowing' of aesthetics, these artists contribute to a new anti-commercial art world that embraces shared resources, reinterpretation of meaning and re-staging of archival materials – a form of digital moving image mending.

The process of editing or cutting is synonymous with the ethos of mending and has at its core a desire to remove the unwanted and re-position content to create greater clarity of meaning or usefulness. Therefore, what we view on the screen or in the gallery or read in a book has already been through a process of change, with original content altered and external input received. How then can any work of art be labelled as truly authentic? Purity and wholeness are constructs that perhaps are fictions in themselves: all is altered, all has undergone change and nothing is quite what it seems.

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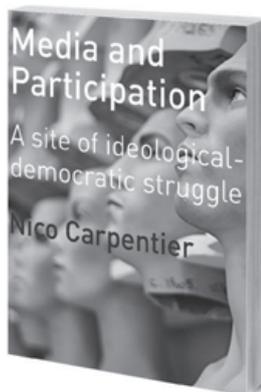
Media and Participation: A Site of Ideological-Democratic Struggle

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Participation has become fashionable again, but at the same time it has always played a crucial role in our contemporary societies, and it has been omnipresent in a surprisingly large number of societal fields. In the case of the media sphere, the present-day media conjuncture is now considered to be the most participatory ever, but media participation has had a long and intense history. To deal with these paradoxes, this book looks at participation as a structurally unstable concept and as the object of a political-ideological struggle that makes it oscillate between minimalist and maximalist versions. This struggle is analysed in theoretical reflections in five fields (democracy, arts, development, spatial planning and media) and in eight different cases of media practice. These case studies also show participation's close connection to power, identity, organization, technology and quality.

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