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Adam Curtis's compelling logic: the tortuous corridor to the hypernormal

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It's like living in the mind of a depressed hippy (Curtis 2007b)

Adam Curtis is a BAFTA award-winning documentary filmmaker who employs borrowed images from the past to construct complex accounts of the political present. Produced primarily for the medium of television (the BBC), though this has expanded in recent years to include digital platforms, his films consist of an idiosyncratic use of archived image and sound fragments: Hollywood and British films, news footage, expert vox pops, television shows, corporate training films, drone footage, film music, sound effects, and so on. These fragments are generally overlaid by a serious 'matter of fact', journalistic voice-over narration (Curtis himself), that tells the story of our times. Curtis is well-known as a polemicist. His films directly question and challenge the proficiency of political elites. For instance, a powerful sequence in Curtis's most debated and cited film, *The power of nightmares* (2004), consists of news footage of George W Bush on a podium looking direct to camera. Bush triumphantly announces, 'one by one terrorists are learning the meaning of American justice'. This image is inserted at the end of a longer sequence that provides an account of absurdist court cases against 'terror suspects' in the USA. After the attacks upon the WTC towers, law enforcement, in its various forms, is busy gathering evidence against 'terror suspects' inside America's borders. The film reveals that the gathered evidence is specious and thin. The Bush image is suitably supplemented by a comic, rhythmic musical composition by the well-known composer, Ennio Morricone, fittingly titled: 'Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto' [Investigation of a citizen above suspicion]. The bassoon, block, and 'boing' sounds that mark the composition lend a comic tone to Bush's emphatic statement. In the sequence, American justice emerges as far from just. Bush's statement is patently absurd (Curtis 2004).

'Bushspeak' has, of course, provided much material for comedians, pundits, documentary filmmakers, and social media users (the same can already be said for the president elect, Donald Trump). Curtis has not added anything new to this chorus. But what I want to suggest is that this articulation of political absurdity is emblematic of Curtis's films in general. This sequence consists of the fragments and strange combinations that mark his productions, and it reveals a characteristic suspicion of political elites and the ideas that underpin their plans for society. I take this suspicion as a central, if not the central, defining feature of Curtis's work. This paper will thus unpack what underpins this suspicion and explore its substance. In the case of Curtis, it has to be noted that it isn't clear if this is a suspicion of politics in general or of politics as it is today. Is his a neoliberal suspicion of ideology, or does it belong to the leftist hermeneutics of suspicion? As a perplexed Paul Arthur asks, we know Curtis despises 'modern forms of liberalism', however, his 'political fealties are murky and somewhat contradictory. Is he a Laborite social democrat, a pragmatic socialist, an anarchist (or Christian anarchist like Tolstoy)?' (2007, p. 17). At any rate, my aim in this paper is not to situate Curtis within a political framework. Rather, my aim is to explore the essential *logic* of this suspicion and unpack the substance of thinking with Curtis. This means I aim to consider Curtis's stories as a form of social theory. To get to this form, it is necessary to engage with three overlapping terrains: criticism of Curtis's films, Curtis as journalist, and the filmmaking techniques Curtis employs. This paper will consider each of these terrains, and then turn to the question of Curtis's logic as form of social theory.

To avoid equivocation, my use of the term 'logic' is drawn directly from discourse analysis. I am concerned with the substance of Curtis's journalistic stories about contemporary power and politics. Rather than the conventional understanding of 'logic' as a specific form of reasoning or argumentative validity, I employ 'logic' in place of 'mechanisms' or causal 'laws'. My basic assumption is hermeneutic. Logics consist of the 'purposes, rules and ontological presuppositions that render a practice or regime possible and intelligible' (Glynos & Howarth 2007, p. 15). In other words, logics support practices, they provide the conditions that 'make that practice 'work' or 'tick'' (2007, p. 15). In this sense, a 'logic' is more analogous to rationales or motivations. We can imagine Curtis in the basement of the BBC archive trawling through various kinds of footage, working upon image and sound combinations, constructing narratives about politics. He is a journalist grappling with how to make sense of the political present, a present, we might add, that is difficult to articulate. 'How do you illustrate something invisible?' (Letham 2016), Curtis asks. This problem lies at the core of his filmic undertakings. This is why an attention to logic is indispensable. At the material level, his films consist of found bits that we can understand as representational fragments, or familiar images and sounds of the world. These fragments are logically combined to produce meaning.

It is worth noting that it is precisely the question of logic, or lack of logic, that has been central in criticism of Curtis's documentaries. His distinctive filmic style has been engaged with in two broad ways. In the

first, the films are rejected outright and in the second, the films are understood sympathetically but cautiously. In the case of the former, Melanie Phillips describes *The power of nightmares* (2004), as a 'bizarre conspiracy theory [that] had about as much grip on reality as claims that the world was controlled by the Illuminati' (2010, p. 126). Similarly, Tim Crook proclaims that *The power of nightmares* 'oversimplifies a much more complex series of events and political influences' (2010, p. 196). Paul Arthur employs the language of McLuhan to assert Curtis is an 'unclassifiable *bricoleur*' who 'establishes his own discursive authority via hip spurts of image-sound collision swaddling the kind of didactic yammering that could easily alienate viewers if applied in a more conventional idiom – the formal message is inseparable from the message' (2007, p. 16). Such critics might perhaps argue that Curtis's assessment of contemporary journalism, quoted at the outset of the paper, would be a fitting description of his own work. In cases of the latter, Jonathan Rosenbaum, for instance, contends Curtis's style is a form of 'jazz improvisation'. And having 'continually being won over by the grand explanations for most of our contemporary problems', he nevertheless avers, 'a closer look at Curtis's filmmaking style starts to raise a few questions about both the arguments themselves and the way he propounds them' (2008, pp. 70-71). Likewise, Peter Bergen warily stresses 'despite [his] many disagreements with *The Power of Nightmares*, which sometimes has the feel of a Noam Chomsky lecture channeled by Monty Python, it is a richly rewarding film because it treats its audience as adults capable of following complex arguments' (2005, pp. 33-34). Angus Macqueen perhaps sums up this cautious position best. He contends 'Curtis is in many ways the most important documentary voice on British TV, simply because he puts across mad arguments and compels you to engage with them' (Bromwich et al. 2016). This paper will take up Curtis's so-called compelling madness in terms of this question of logic. To put it simply, this paper asks what happens if we do take seriously the claim that Curtis is both a Chomsky *and* a Monty Python? I'm not so sure such a combination is so troubling. For instance, in the case of Monty Python, the satirical representation of hard-line leftist politics in *The Life of Brian* (1979), in the form of the People's Front of Judea, does not seem to be wide of the mark. Perhaps Curtis's strange style of journalism is not so wide of the political mark either (Jones 1979).

As the critics cited above all seem to suggest, Curtis resists classification. However, despite this resistance there are consistent points of articulation and repetition within his work. Curtis can be located; his documentary style is far from mad, if we understand madness as incoherence and without regular patterns, or as without a logic. What makes Curtis compelling is that his documentaries consist of the messy entanglement of compilation film practices with journalism, which aims to inform the public what is happening in the world. The end result, I maintain, is both a powerful articulation of the post-political present and a compelling form of social theory.

The power of political ideas

I want to consider Curtis as a filmmaker and journalist grappling with the post-political condition of contemporary power. His is a search for an adequate form of expression for what he takes as the logic of presentism within today's managerial age. Politics today, he explains, 'doesn't want to look to the future. It just [looks to the past] to manage the present' (cited in Obrist 2012). Curtis can thus be squarely located in terms of Wilson & Swyngedouw's (2014) succinct explanation of the post-political present. Drawing on Mouffe (2005), Žižek (1999), and Rancière (1999), among others, they explain: in the post-political situation

the political—understood as a space of contestation and agonistic engagement—is increasingly colonised by politics—understood as technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free market economics, and cosmopolitan liberalism. In post-politics, political contradictions are reduced to policy problems to be managed by experts and legitimated through participatory processes in which the scope of possible outcomes is narrowly defined in advance. 'The people'—as a potentially disruptive political collective—is replaced by the population—the aggregated object of opinion polls, surveillance, and bio-political optimisation. Citizens become consumers, and elections are framed as just another 'choice', in which individuals privately select their preferred managers of the conditions of economic necessity. (Wilson & Swyngedouw 2014, p. 6)

If we follow this line of thought to Mark Fisher's convincing account of contemporary culture's inability 'to grasp and articulate the present' (2014, p. 8), in Curtis's films politics is a stark symptom of this inability. Curtis characteristically excavates from history the political ideas that have become foundational for contemporary political ambitions. He typically understands the ambition of political elites as an intention to build a better, more stable, freer society. What he attempts to demonstrate is that this modern aim invariably produces its opposite: a society in crisis preoccupied with control. Along with *The power of nightmares*, his most recent films, *The century of the self* (2002), *The trap: what happened to our dream of freedom* (2007), *All watched over by machines of loving grace* (2011), *Bitter lake* (2015), and *HyperNormalisation* (2016) all work, in overlapping ways, precisely in terms of the aforementioned inability.

The century of the self charts the long rise, from Freud to Edward Bernays and beyond, of contemporary focus group politics. In this context, governments no longer aim to govern. Instead, they aim to be responsive to the desires of self-interested individuals, what Bernard Stiegler calls the 'proletarianized consumer' (2010, pp. 25-28). Curtis shows this leads to a chaotic form of governance. In *The power of nightmares* chaos and threat from outside forces feature as a central concern for politicians. They discover that their purpose is to protect the public from nightmarish possibilities. This produces a paranoid and

controlled society that is suspicious of contingency and difference (Curtis 2004). *The trap* (Curtis 2007) explores the related tension between freedom and certainty. The necessity of certainty, understood here as the demand for predictability in the context of Cold War paranoia, opens the door for a calculative rationality that propagates 'counter-finality', in Sartre's sense of the term (2006). *All watched over by machines of loving grace* directly questions the Silicon Valley belief in the capacity of self-organising social systems, modelled upon the neoliberal subject, to overcome hierarchical forms of political organisation. Curtis contends that such systems simply lead to a new form of autocracy (Curtis 2011). *Bitter Lake* explores the disastrous, unanticipated consequences of Saudi Arabia's agreement with the USA in the 1920s to allow access to their oil, but only with the caveat that the Saudis aggressive and intolerant form of Islam, Wahhabism, would remain unhindered (Curtis 2015). And *HyperNormalisation*, which I will consider in more detail below, presents a bleak account of increasing global instability and the powerlessness of politicians to do anything to keep this in check. Curtis maintains that this powerlessness is a symptom of post-political culture that emerged in the 1970s, in which individuals, suspicious of collective political action, watch with cool detachment. Individuals retreat instead into the carefully constructed fake world produced by the new hi-tech corporations (Curtis 2016).

In each of these films we find the specific Curtis formulation: identify specific figures and their grapple with socio-political reality, articulate the ideas formulated in response to this perceived reality, trace the life of the idea as it is taken up by powerful elites in their contexts, and then demonstrate how the ideas fail to grasp socio-political reality and deliver the desired effects. This is a formulation, we might add, with more than a passing resemblance to the techniques of that branch of political studies that focuses upon ideas and their relation to the material interests of political agents. John L Campbell, for instance, argues for scholarship that includes,

identifying the actors who seek to influence policy making with their ideas, ascertaining the institutional conditions under which these actors have more or less influence, and understanding how political discourse affects the degree to which policy ideas are communicated and translated into practice. (2002, p. 21)

As can be seen, ideas are central in the Curtis formulation. As he explains in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'I spend my whole time just looking at how ideas have consequences, not necessarily what the promoters of them intended'. He continues:

One of the things I'm fascinated by at the moment is the rise of managerial theory. It works in absurd, comic ways. It leads to the police being told that they have a certain quota of criminals they have to catch, so if they can't catch them, they go and make them up. These are very comic, silly things that I would have done on a program like *That's Life!*, but they're also expressions of something that Weber wrote about back in the nineteenth century which he

called the 'iron cage,' about how rationality, when applied to social situations to try and control and manage societies, would often lead to absurd outcomes. (Curtis cited in Obrist 2012)

As Curtis states, the iron cage of rationality and the production of absurdity are central for his logic. We can usefully link Curtis's logic to Weber's famous distinction between, what he called, 'world images' and 'ideal interests'. In a much-cited passage on the problem of social redemption Weber suggests:

Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the 'world images' that have been created by 'ideas' have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest. (1946, p. 280)

It is clear that for Weber world images, which can be defined as disinterested ideas, function as a crucial resource for the pursuit of material interests. It is also the case that, in many instances, world ideas direct such pursuits. As Eastwood argues, Weber is highlighting 'the role that the need for 'meaning' plays in causally motivating someone to go down one or another track' (2005, p. 94). Curtis is clearly concerned with the ideas through which politicians and power elites derive meaning, define their purpose and build tracks. We thus need to consider how Curtis's films articulate political ideas and the formation of tracks. How do Curtis's films work? How does he construct narratives committed to articulating the iron cage of rationality?

The Problem of Curtis's style

I turn now to consider Curtis's filmic style. In order to unpack Curtis's logic, we need to explore the relationship between art and nonfiction film. This relationship is important in this context because we need to decide whether or not Curtis's films are motivated by artistic concerns, exploring the documentary form, or didactic concerns, as in informing the public what is happening in the world. For his part, Curtis resolutely 'considers himself a journalist' rather than a formal innovator (Greene 2016). However, criticism of his films can't seem to decide. As I have stated, the two strands of criticism of Curtis's films tend to focus upon supposed disjunctions between narrator and image. At first blush this focus seems valid. Curtis appears to be exploring this disjunction, and can be broadly approached as an 'experimental' documentary filmmaker. From this first approach, the focus is upon the formal play of images and their relation to the authority of the narrative voice. Correspondingly, the formal properties of the film can be understood as problematizing and questioning representation itself. The authority of the journalistic narrative voice is disrupted and truth claims are thus questioned. However, Curtis's films don't quite fit the experimental category, if, as I have suggested, this category involves undermining representation. This is because Curtis's political commentaries require spectators to comprehend and follow the authoritative voice of the narrator. The play of images doesn't seem to succeed in disrupting the

narrative voice (clearly Curtis argues with images rather than against them). Conversely, in the second of the aforementioned assessment of Curtis critics, Curtis's political commentary is not only undiminished but also foregrounded relative to the imagery. Questions concerning the validity of his statements about politics and veracity of the evidence for supporting the statements become central. This leads to problems as well. In this second approach, it seems that the play of images disrupts the narrative voice too much, as in Bergen's claim that the films are Monty Pythonesque, for example (2005, pp. 33-34). His experimentation with images doesn't seem to provide solid evidence for the commentary. On this basis, some have even concluded that Curtis's is thus the voice of conspiracy theory, understood pejoratively. Conspiracy films tend to revolve around shadowy figures, widespread causal links, unanswered questions and enigmatic gaps in knowledge. And the absence of evidence is often presented as proof of conspiracy (Nicholls 2011). The supposed lack of presented evidence in Curtis's arguments can be read in these terms as baseless assertions forged via dubious causal links. I don't think, however, the conspiracy charge helps us understand Curtis's films.

The difficulty with Curtis's films is that, on one level, we see and hear fragments, and, on the other level, we hear clear pronouncements about contemporary politics that bear no straightforward relationship to the fragments. The form seemingly pulls in different directions: didacticism versus play, an argumentative logic versus fragmentation. Curtis criticism is, hence, cautious or hostile. His films don't allow critics to decide which side of the experimental/didactic ledger he sits on. And the centripetal force of Curtis's style makes it difficult to situate his films within existing documentary categories. We thus need to ask: where might we situate Curtis in terms of the art versus non-fiction tension?

We can consider his work, firstly, in terms of the compilation film, as 'a chorus of bits', in the words of Mulvey (2007, p. 109). In his important work on found footage montage, Wees usefully defines the compilation film as follows:

[The] principal characteristics of nearly all compilation films: shots taken from films that have no necessary relationship to each other; a concept (theme, argument, story) that motivates the selection of the shots and the order in which they appear; and a verbal accompaniment (voice-over or text on the screen or both) that yokes the shots to the concept. (1993, p. 35)

The main concern of Wees' description is with 'the media's power to make ideologically loaded images seem like unmediated representations of reality' (Wees 1993, p. 48). He thus outlines the degree to which documentary films interrogate corporate media representations, and draws a distinction between three techniques: compilation, appropriation and collage. These techniques are distinguished by the degree to which they 'emphasize image-ness' (Wees 1993, p. 47), with compilation films presuming a straightforward link with reality (such as *The Atomic Café* (Loader et al. 1982)), and

appropriation films presuming no link whatsoever (as in Michael Jackson's *Man in the Mirror* (Wilson 1987). In contrast, the 'collage film' (*A Movie* (Conner 1958), for example), he maintains, 'subjects its fragments of media-reality to some form of deconstruction, or at the very least, to a recontextualization that prevents an unreflective reception of representations of reality' (Wees 1993, p. 47). Laying bare the artifice of representation is a 'revolutionary' artistic practice in Wees' thinking. The basic problem, with Wees, however, is that his schematic outline of borrowed footage film fetishizes representation and referentially. The found footage film is either too referential (compilation) or not referential enough (appropriation). The Goldilocks moment is found in the modernist collage form, in which self-reflexivity offsets naïve realism and the surface play of postmodernism.

For Wees, the compilation film doesn't go far enough to deconstruct corporate media representations. In the compilation film the 'archival shot is presumed to have concrete, historical referents that ground the film's discourse in reality, and lend credence to its overall argument' (1993, p. 44). It would be tempting to situate Curtis in the compilation category. We could, for instance, draw similarities between Curtis's work and Baldwin's *Tribulation 99: alien anomalies under America* (Zryd 2003). And his films do present explanations for political reality, which can be judged on the basis of veracity. The images are employed as referential support for, rather than questioning, the explanations. However, Curtis doesn't work in terms of the parameters set forth by Wees here. And clearly Curtis's films can't be explained in terms of the appropriation film (with no link to the referent) or collage film (with its transformation of the image-ness of the image). Images work in a number of different ways in Curtis's films. We find elements of the compilation film, and, at the same time, images working beyond referentiality. The directly referential aspect of Curtis—his political commentary—is best considered in terms of the conventions of journalism, the aim of which, if we follow Curtis at his word, is to tell the public what is happening in the world. This is at a time, it must be noted, when journalistic explanations seem to be in short supply. Curtis contends in a short piece titled, *Oh dearism*, and it is worth quoting at length:

[...] in 1989 the West won the cold war. The old political story of left versus right was finished, but reporters still needed a grand simple story about the world into which all the chaotic events, and fragments of stuff that happen every day could be fitted. And waiting in the wings was the hippy counter-culture view of the world, a view which saw everything as a struggle between innocent individuals and corrupt political systems. TV news embraced it eagerly. And it worked. From the glorious revolutions in Eastern Europe, to the brave students in Tiananmen Square, through to the plucky Bosnians and the horror of Sarajevo, television news told a story of noble individuals bravely standing up against bad political systems. But this simple battle between good and evil couldn't last, and it finally cracked [...] in Africa. [In 1994] a horrific war began [in Rwanda between the Hutu and Tutsi] in which four and a half million people died and everyone was evil, even the children. And that had

a terrible effect on television news, because when there weren't any good or innocent people to support any longer the kind of news reporting invented in the 1990s made no sense. Because the news had given up reporting [conflicts] as political struggles it meant there was now no way to understand why these terrible events were happening. And instead, political conflicts around the world from Darfur to Gaza are now portrayed to us as simple illustrations of the mindless cruelty of the human race, about which nothing can be done. To which the only response is: 'oh dear'. It's like living in the mind of a depressed hippy. (Curtis 2007b)

I take this assessment of contemporary journalism as crucial for engaging with Curtis. Clearly, his work seeks to reverse oh dearism. What makes Curtis compelling is that his films consist of a realist journalistic narrative voice with a visual style informed by, but not reducible to, the techniques of the compilation film. Curtis, in fact, has continued to explore the compilation film technique. The film *It felt like a kiss* (Curtis 2009), included as a component in an immersive theatre production, is the clearest example. The aforementioned disjunction between image and voice, which animates Curtis criticism, can thus be read as a dialectical relation. Instead of an either/or relation, image and narration combine in Curtis's films to produce meaning effects. Curtis's is a logic of both/and, rather than the negative logic of either/or. There are a number of image/narration effects at work that are embedded with the indexical meanings of their initial contexts—historical footage, TV news, 'amateur' video, advertising, golden age of Hollywood film, and so on—and we also find symbolic images as well: visual metaphor, the ideological image, the mood image, the movement image (signifying something happening without content) and so on.

It is worth illustrating some of these images in relation to various unsystematic examples. Curtis logic is embedded in the interplay of image and narration. For instance, Curtis employs the standard documentary interview image (borrowed or shot by Curtis himself) with key figures and 'experts' (academics, government officials, and insiders). These figures speak for themselves, as it were, and their comments are edited in terms of the overall narrative trajectory of the film. For the most part, the interview functions as quoted information, as unfolding evidence. We always directly hear from and see key figures: Fredric Hayek, Ayn Rand, Edward Bernays, Philip Gould, and so on. There are also instances in which expert evidence is turned back against itself in compelling ways. For instance, we encounter the mathematician John Nash, in *The Trap*, finally reflecting upon the idea of the self-interested, calculating individual that underpins game theory, of which he is a founder. The film leads up to the moment of Nash's admission that the figure of the self-interested, calculating individual is a 'mistake'. This figure is too narrow a take on the complexities of human behaviour. Nash's admission lends much weight to the film's overall claim concerning the absurd consequences of neoliberal forms of governance that are underpinned by a game theory logic. In effect, Curtis is making what seems like an incorruptible claim: even the founder of the theory disavows it! (Curtis 2007a)

Alongside the standard interview technique, we find the ideological image. The orientalist film, *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940), in *The Power of Nightmares* works in precisely this way. *The Power of Nightmares* is a film that traces the rise of the 'Neocons' in US politics. Curtis contends that after the 9/11 attacks the Islamists were basically destroyed, but the neoconservatives opportunistically seized power and began to reconstruct America on the basis of a phantom enemy. The voice-over narrator (Curtis) tells us the Americans developed a picture of Bin Laden as 'an all powerful figure at the head of a large terrorist network that had an organised hierarchy of control'. As this neoconservative fantasy is announced, we see the images from the *The Thief of Bagdad*. The shadowy figure of Jaffar (Conrad Veidt) grows with arms raised to bedevil the young king, Ahmad (John Justin). At this point in Curtis's film, the images point directly to Western Orientalist ideology. As Edward Said argues in his much-cited book, *Orientalism*, Orientalism is 'a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')' (Said 1978, p. 43). This complex interplay between image and voice points to the ease with which the demonization of the Middle East is effected by neoconservatives. *The Thief of Bagdad* is also employed for similar effect in sequences detailing the fruitless search for the Al Qaeda network in Afghanistan. We see a scroll: 'Ten thousand pieces of gold for the body of Ali Baba and the destruction of the band of thieves'.

Further fragments work as visual metaphor. Among many examples – a dead forest signifying the failure of scientific research (*The way of all flesh*), high angle shots of city traffic to signify the machinic qualities of mass societies (*Century of the self* and *The Trap*), among others. We also see a reoccurring image of corridors in Curtis's films. This image (a different corridor in each) is repeated in *Pandora's box*, *The trap*, *The power of nightmares*, *All watched over by machines of loving grace*, and *HyperNormalisation*. In each of these films the corridor image dialectically connects with the narrative trajectory concerned with the iron cage rationality of political systems. For instance, in *Pandora's box* an image of a long darkly lit and colourless corridor supplements a Russian expert explaining the Soviet plan for an engineered society. 'Each group [in society]', he explains, 'is governed by a set of iron laws as unchanging as the laws of nature, physics and the mechanical sciences'. In *The power of nightmares* the corridor appears in relation to statements asserting that Osama Bin Laden's group was actually disorganized and became known as Al Qaeda only after September 11. The term, Al Qaeda, in fact, came from a key, yet unreliable US informant, Jamal Al Fadl. Curtis's voice-over: 'in reality Jamal Al Fadl was on the run from Bin Laden, having stolen money from him. In return for his evidence the Americans gave him witness protection in America, and hundreds of thousands of dollars' (Curtis 2004). And in *The Trap*, in which corridors abound, the corridor appears in relation to Curtis's voice-over: 'the centre for developing the [cold war protectionist] strategy, was a military think tank called the Rand Corporation. The strategists at Rand used game theory to create mathematical models that predicted how the Soviets would behave in response to what they

saw the American's doing. Out of this came the fundamental structure of the nuclear age' (Curtis 2007a). In each of these examples, the corridor image follows an exterior shot of the building in which, we assume, the corridor is located. The corridor thus marks the interior, the space of power. The crucial point about these interiors, as constructed in the films, is that they are cold, indifferent and empty.

The final image I will mention is the mood/affect image, or, more accurately, the something-is-happening-image. This 'something' is not named; it is pre-discursive. Curtis films are punctuated by images of dancing, of freeways, and the setting desert sun, among many others. These images generally serve as a marker of the quotidian, the simple aspects of life as against complexity. For instance, we see images in *Bitter Lake* of a white soldier sitting in a ditch amidst trees, playing with a bird. The bird is perched upon the barrel of his gun. In the sequence, we hear the non-diegetic music of Ahmad Zahir, his 'Aye Nam Ghumat: the Taranae Man' track from the *Afghan Album VII* (1970). In the midst of footage of war-torn Afghanistan, the image serves no narrative purpose other than to add a dimension of humanity to the situation. Simple acts, such as enjoying nature, overlay the terribleness with hope (Curtis 2015).

This is a rather unsystematic account of images in Curtis's films, nevertheless it demonstrates the degree to which image and sound fragments work dialectically with voice to produce documentary meaning. To be clear, this typology of images is not to be taken in the sense proposed by Deleuze in his much-cited cinema books, *Cinema 1: the movement-image* (1986) and *Cinema 2: the time-image* (1989). In these books, Deleuze forges philosophical concepts—such as the 'cinema of the body' and 'cinema of the brain' (Deleuze 1989, p. 204)—around the question of how cinema works as a mode of thought. Drawing upon Bergson's work on time and space, and life and matter, he reveals what cinema as a whole shows 'us about space and time that the other arts don't show' (Deleuze 1995, p. 58). The current discussion on Curtis is not philosophically driven by Deleuze's concern. Instead, my concern is with the pragmatic production of meaning. My claim is that we need to navigate between the two prevailing types of critical response to Curtis's films: charges of conspiracy theory versus the sympathetic but cautious endorsement. This typology is thus designed to stress the productive conjunction between journalistic voice-over narration and compilation techniques that characterises Curtis's practice. The upshot is that we can engage with the film's claims about contemporary geopolitics, and, ultimately, the logic of his films.

HyperNormalisation

I want to turn now to Curtis's latest film, *HyperNormalisation* (released October 2016 on the BBC iPlayer). My aim at this point will be to move the discussion towards some general observations on the logic of Curtis's work, and then consider the implications of this logic for social

theory. As is characteristic of Curtis, *HyperNormalisation* is a dense film that uncovers the failure of politics to adequately grasp and deal with the present. The film draws together and recasts three trajectories of inquiry that are familiar across Curtis's films. In this case, the trajectories are disjointed, and work in terms of a meanwhile this and then this form. The first consists of the key political and economic developments that have had a global impact. The second provides a critical account of the emergence of digital technology and automated management systems. And the third explores the rise of a new understanding of political resistance in 1960s and 1970s Europe and the USA. Each of these trajectories work as a set of disjointed forces, and each produces different and, at times dark, unpredictable effects across the globe. When drawn together, these trajectories produce the aforementioned general failure of contemporary politics. We might say that Curtis, as per Althusser, catalogues the overdetermined present, and that the political intersection of forces produces a complexity that seems impossible to manage.

On the key political and economic developments trajectory, the bulk of the film, Curtis outlines the following: the city of New York's shaky bankruptcy in 1975, the financial sector's bailout of the city of New York and subsequent rise to power, Donald Trump's business opportunism in New York in the 1980s, Henry Kissinger's devastating balance of powers doctrine with respect to al-Assad in Syria and the Middle East, the shifting and almost comic US relationship with Gaddafi and Libya, the forging of the doctrine of the suicide bomber in Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan's disastrous retreat of US troops from the then increasingly complex Middle East, and Bush's and Blair's failed war upon Iraq. The film frames each of these situations as absurd political developments, and rather than confront this difficulty, Curtis maintains that politics retreats and, instead, resorts to constructing simple and reassuring narratives about the world.

The second trajectory traces the rise of the libertarian Silicon Valley, and the strange connection between 'computer utopians' and 1960s counter-culture. At issue here, is the rise of the hegemony of anti-hierarchical social forms as antidote to bureaucracy and institutional forms of politics. This is also a common theme in Curtis's films. He suggests that computerisation and our increasing reliance upon networks and algorithms leads to the dehumanisation of the world. The messy world of human judgement, political debate, and reflection give way to a machinic world of rapid calculation and decision making. What counts is efficiency and predictability, rather than complex human desires and needs.

And on the third trajectory, which I aim to explore in much more detail than the aforementioned trajectories, Curtis directly confronts the failure of contemporary resistance to these aforementioned political situations. It is worth mentioning that 'politics', in this context, seems to strictly refer to the institutional mechanisms of governance. The more general cultural studies sense of politics as power relations, or as

rupture, is not taken up by Curtis. Instead he works in terms of a politics versus resistance dyad. Given the dire situation of contemporary politics, the film thus turns to the question of resistance, and what forms of resistance have emerged to combat it. One might expect that an effective resistance movement might emerge to challenge this dire political condition. However, despite ruinous effects such as a destabilised Middle East, and the emergence of Trump's authoritarian form of politics, and so on, Curtis maintains that a resistance movement with a lasting impact has, regrettably, failed to develop.

In what is perhaps the most damning statement of the film, the failure of resistance movements is due to the rise of forms of action and organisation that are opposed to employing and engaging with politics and political ideas. Following the rise of individualism in the 1960s, Curtis maintains that in 1970s activism, art, and music, there emerged a form of social disconnection from politics. It became 'cool', he claims, to eschew politics and instead pursue self-experience and expression. Curtis employs 1970s footage of 'alternative' art and lifestyle practices to exemplify this claim. Patti Smith is cited as its central key spokesperson. Smith represented a new form of individualism that shunned collective political action. Curtis cites Smith: 'I could not identify with the political movements any longer [...] or the manic activity in the streets. In trying to join them, I felt overwhelmed by yet another form of bureaucracy'.

At this point in the film, Curtis seems to accept Berardi's claim that in the 1970s 'a large-scale process of mass irony was launched'. Speaking from the context of Italy in the 1970s, Berardi recalls, 'We saw' resistance 'as a suspension of the kingdom of necessity and were convinced that power [*potere*] has power [only] as far as those who have no power take power seriously' (2009, p. 21). In other words, institutional forms of power are effective only because subjects concede to and therefore fuel the institution's force. This means that disengaged and autonomist forms of resistance disrupt the effective operation of power. Disengaged resistance provides no ground for institutional power to produce effects. Starved of the necessary fuel, institutional power thus fades into insignificance and crashes, and new forms of social life begin to emerge.

Across a number of films, along with *HyperNormalisation*, Curtis maintains that disengaged forms of resistance (the post-political left) have become dominant. He questions the effectiveness of such a form, and argues that it produces fruitless results. The post-political left no longer has any political sting, let alone any vision for the future. This means that rather than wither, politics remains unchecked and continues to produce its absurd and disastrous effects.

Curtis's criticism of post-politics and its refusal to engage at the institutional level is not uncommon. For instance, his argument corresponds to Žižek's sharp suggestion that recent left politics is 'a purely negative gesture of angry rejection and an equally abstract

demand for justice, lacking the ability to translate this demand into a concrete political programme' (2014, 124). Similarly, Srnicek and Williams argue that the left 'is more concerned to appear right than to think about the conditions of political change' (2015, 22; see also Taylor 2015). For his part, Curtis points to the incapacity of disconnected forms of resistance and social organisation to adequately deal with and challenge power. *All watched over by machines of loving grace* makes the same claim. The effect of disconnected resistance merely allows political elites to become disconnected from the often-detrimental effects of political processes. We live in a post-political vacuum in which politics becomes increasingly unmoored from everyday life.

The title of the film, *HyperNormalisation*, is thus a term that defines the general tenor of the post-political present. With it, Curtis gestures toward the problem of subjectivity and why this political absurdity is generally accepted or tolerated by the public. *The century of the self* is his most extended engagement with this problem, in which theories of consciousness derived from psychoanalysis provide the basis for manipulating public opinion. In *Hypernormalisation* the problem is set forth on the terrain of ideology critique, though the film doesn't explore this terrain in any detail. Hypernormalisation basically means: the bulk of the public live as if this absurd situation is normal. Of course, this doesn't mean that no one thinks that there is nothing strange about politics and economics today. Reactions to the rise of Donald Trump, as well to common situations such as the perpetual restructuring of public intuitions, suggest many do. The point is that despite the absurdity of contemporary politics the public acts as if this is politics as usual. Curtis finds a parallel for the performance of this is politics as usual in Alexei Yurchak's work on the final years of the Soviet Union. The term, 'hypernormalisation', is drawn from his book, *Everything was forever, until it was no more: the last Soviet generation* (2005). As in the late Soviet Union, Curtis would have it that the political present in the West is hypernormal. This is to say that not only do we think that politics today is normal, we also think it is normal that there are no alternatives. He argues, we live in a carefully constructed make believe world that has long since abandoned a commitment to political ideas, and robust political debate and action.

As the title of the film suggests, the tiredness of the situation in the Soviet Union serves as the key metaphor for this abandonment. Curtis states:

Those who ran the Soviet Union had believed they could plan and manage a new kind of socialist society. But, they had discovered that it was impossible to control and predict everything, and the plan ran out of control. Rather than reveal this, the technocrats began to pretend that everything was still going according to plan. And what emerged instead was a fake version of the society. The Soviet Union became a society where everyone knew what their leaders said was not real, because they would see with their own eyes that the economy was falling apart. But, everybody had to play along and pretend that it was real, because no one could imagine any

alternative. One Soviet writer called this hypernormalisation. You were so much a part of the system that it was impossible to see beyond it. The fakeness was hypernormalised (Curtis 2016).

This sequence opens with the sound of the Janka and the Great October track, 'Grief Washing is Light', from the *Declassed Elements* album (2012). On screen is the oft repeated image metaphor of an empty bureaucratic corridor. The camera tracks along the corridor and turns to the left, and repeats several times. The sound track fades and is replaced by the sound of old telephones ringing. At the point in which Curtis states 'Rather than reveal this, the technocrats began to pretend' the camera remains stationary, as if thinking. The camera then turns in the opposite direction tracking through the corridor once again. The sequence metaphorically reveals the circularity and insularity of the technocratic operations of the State. Curtis shows how detached the technocrats were from the outside social world. The point the film makes is that the Soviet iron cage is not unlike the post-political vacuum in the contemporary West.

Given the centrality of the metaphor for the film, it will be worth unpacking Yurchak's account of hypernormalisation. Curtis's logic can be clearly located in this encounter with Yurchak (though Yurchak is not directly referenced in the film). This encounter also reveals the substance of Curtis's account of our political times. I will show how he bends Yurchak to fit his purpose. As I stated, Yurchak's book seeks to provide an account of Soviet life in the final years of the Soviet system. This account is framed by a key question: how is it that despite the increasing tiredness of the Soviet system the public seemingly continued to support it? This question is crucial for Yurchak because he aims to challenge explanations of the social that draw upon postmodern simulation or ideology critique. The standard explanation is that the Soviets mimicked or simulated allegiance to the State in public while maintaining dissidence in private. We 'could conclude' as in the case of Epstein (2000), Yurchak cautions, 'that the late Soviet world became a kind of 'postmodern' universe where grounding was no longer possible, and where reality became reduced to discursive simulacra' (p. 75). Baudrillard is, of course, cited by Yurchak to exemplify the postmodern problem. Yurchak argues that critical work that takes up Baudrillard's articulation of hyperreality, as Yurchak understands it, to explain the absurdity of late Soviet society falls into a binary trap. In the hyperreality explanation the hegemonic ideology of the party becomes completely detached from everyday reality. As a consequence, Soviet citizens occupy a strange space in which their public pro-government displays are 'either true ('real' support) or false ('dissimulation' of support)' (Yurchak 2005, p. 17).

Žižekian forms of ideology critique (1991) suffer from a similar problem. Attempting to overcome this binary, Žižek maintains, subjects will only accept their lived reality if they believe this acceptance is an expression of free subjectivity. Free subjectivity emerges when the subject is able to establish a conscious distance, an 'ideological disidentification', from explicit ideals and prescriptions. Authority hoodwinks no one and yet,

crucially, all comply. As such, ideology takes a cynical form. As Žižek puts it, 'they know it, but they are doing it anyway', or, in another formulation, 'I know politicians are untrustworthy but I still act as though I do not know this'. If we follow ideology critique, we could contend this is the cynicism that characterises life in late Soviet society. This cynical form arises because the subject's relationship to authority is fetishistic. Politics is less about knowledge, than symbolic forms, and empty master signifiers around which political identifications galvanise. Political identification is mediated through identifications with others, more precisely, the 'big other' (the party) who believes for them despite what they might cynically think. The subject believes in the belief of the big other, participates, and thus gains identity. At the same time, however, they are absolved from any responsibility for political outcomes.

For Yurchak, however, these explanations fall short. Yurchak, instead, turns to speech act theory and argues that the Soviet public supported the Soviet state but not in terms of the split between the simulated and real or the public and private. He argues 'the ritualized acts and speech acts of authoritative discourse were not simply replicated because of institutional power relations, control or threat of punishment. They were replicated because of the importance of the performative dimension' (p. 27) of language. He argues that explanations derived from the hyperreal or ideological cynicism fail to engage with the pragmatic aspects of language, and fail to take the position that language speaks us rather than expresses an inner self. For Yurchak, the irreducibility and, at the same time, indissociability of the constative and performative dimensions of language are crucial. Drawing upon debates around Austin's (1962) *How to do things with words*, Yurchak underscores the historically shifting relationship between the constative dimension of speech acts (cultural meaningfulness) and the performative dimensions (normalized routines and practices). He argues that in Soviet society 'the replication of the fixed and normalized forms of discourse became an end in itself, and the constative meanings of these discursive forms became increasingly unimportant' (p. 26). This led to the situation in which language became '*hypernormalized*'—that is 'fixed and cumbersome forms of language that were often neither interpreted nor easily interpretable at the level of constative meaning' (p. 50). The problem is thus not whether or not the subject actually believes or is cynical, or that the subject simulates in order to conceal their actual feelings and thoughts, it is that there is a disconnection between pro-government support and constative meaning. In other words, the performance of support is meaningless from the perspective of the subject. This is not to say, of course, that the life of subjects is meaningless. In fact, Yurchak carefully draws upon a wide range of cultural materials to demonstrate that 'the performative reproduction of the form of rituals and speech acts actually *enabled* the emergence of diverse, multiple, and unpredictable meanings in everyday life' (p. 25).

It is worth pointing out, that despite Yurchak's dismissal of the hyperreality explanation for late Soviet society, Baudrillard's account of

'the masses' is not antithetical to his position. Baudrillard's masses are comparable to Yurchak's performative public. As Baudrillard explains:

power manipulates nothing, the masses are neither misled nor mystified. [...] This comforts it in its illusion of being power, and leads away from the much more dangerous fact that this indifference of the masses is their true, their only practice, that there is no other ideal of them to imagine, nothing in this to deplore, but everything to analyse as the brute fact of a collective retaliation and of a refusal to participate in the recommended ideals, however enlightened (1983, p. 14).

If Baudrillard views indifference as a form of refusal, for Yurchak the performative distances subjects from hegemonic meaning. In a hypernormalized society the relationship between constative meaning—ideology, beliefs, and so on—and the performative dimension of language is unsettled. As Yurchak argues:

precisely because authoritative language was hegemonic, unavoidable, and hypernormalized, it was no longer read by its audiences literally, at the level of constative meanings. Therefore, which statements represented 'facts' and which did not was relatively unimportant. Instead, Soviet people engaged with authoritative language at the level of the performative dimension (p. 76).

There is no accounting for what the public think. For instance, we can say the same for supporters of Donald Trump. Concerns with the veracity of the factual claims he makes, or with ideological fidelity, are outweighed by the performative and ritualistic dimensions authoritative discourse calls forth. Trump supporters consider themselves to be part of something without that something having any need for constative consistency.

If we consider Curtis's film in relation to Yurchak's book, two points emerge. Firstly, in Curtis's film the Soviet public is articulated as downtrodden and without hope. This is because he falls into the binary trap that Yurchak is careful to avoid. As Yurchak puts it, what 'tends to get lost in binary accounts is the crucial and seemingly paradoxical fact that, for a great number of Soviet citizens, many of the fundamental values, ideals, and realities of socialist life [...] were of genuine importance' (p. 8), despite the situation of their everyday lives. For Curtis, the downtrodden Soviet public don't believe in it but act as if they do. And secondly, Curtis takes his analysis further than Yurchak. Hypernormalisation bends away from the terrain of everyday practices and becomes a term for the general cynicism of global power. Politics has become detached from the everyday public and from democratic processes. This is a developing theme in Curtis's films. Power now hides behind a veil of public relations, which works not coherently in terms of a clear set of on-going political ideas, but, conversely, incoherently. Its aim is to produce a perplexed public. Increasingly, Curtis maintains, unsettling the relation between the real and fake is a

key strategy of power. This strategy is underscored, in the film, with a return to the former Soviet Union, Putin's Russia. He states:

After the failure of the revolutions [Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring], it was not just the radicals, no one in the West had any idea of how to change the world. At home, the politicians had given so much of their power away, to finance and the ever-growing managerial bureaucracies, that they in effect had become managers themselves. While abroad, all of their adventures had failed, and their simplistic vision of the world had been exposed as dangerous and destructive.

As a consequence, politics becomes a strange kind of theatre, best exemplified by post-Soviet Russia and Putin's PR machine—the 'political technologists'. The key figure here is Vladislav Surkov, one of Putin's closest advisors. He originally came from the theatre world, Curtis tells us, and he has taken ideas from avant-garde theatre and applied them to politics. His aim, Curtis explains, was to transform politics into a strange kind of theatre in which the public become unsure of what is actually happening. In a kind of Orwellian sense, Curtis contends the Kremlin sponsored a range of groups, from mass anti-fascist groups to the opposite, neo-nazi skinheads, as well as liberal human rights groups. These groups all challenged the government. The crucial aspect of this strategy, is that Surkov let it be known the Kremlin was behind each group. The upshot is that no one knows what is real or fake. Power keeps any opposition constantly confused. The sequence concludes with Donald Trump, and his constantly shifting campaign. This campaign is marked by its *lack* of coherency. Trump has attacked Republicans, Democrats, and Wall Street. We might call this a compelling madness, in which we find messages for hard right nationalists, for anti-Wall Street campaigns, for anti-Trans Pacific Partnership activists, as well as the disaffected working class.

Television documentary as social theory

I want to conclude with some brief consideration of the implications of Curtis's journalistic provocations on contemporary power. Where does thinking with Curtis lead us? Firstly, with Curtis it is clear that causal explanations for social phenomena are not straightforward. Contemporary power works across and through multiple fronts. Clearly, Curtis's logic engages with this political complexity. There is no singular causal mechanism, such as social class, the economy, the sovereign individual, or political idea such as the equalising force of self-organising systems, that shapes the social world. The composition of these films themselves—complex fragments (indexes of the past) drawn from the archive to form a narrative—ought, quite literally, to be understood as a grapple with complexity. The many image types, which I have gestured toward with an unsystematic and incomplete typology, reveal that there is no straightforward way to represent the social and the political. Curtis's logic can be characterised as a compelling poetics, one that undermines one-dimensional explanatory approaches and which, however tenuous, draws together multiple social situations and

strands of thought. He attempts to articulate social complexity and, on this basis, reveals the inadequacy of political elites to sufficiently engage with it. If such links across these situations and strands seem tenuous, it does not necessarily mean that Curtis can be considered a mad conspiracy theorist (as in the aforementioned first strand of criticism). Rather, these links remain open because they are difficult to pin down. This difficulty is precisely what his films articulate. His claim is that politics should grapple with this difficulty too.

Secondly, and I will develop this point more fully, Curtis is well attuned to shifts in the logic of power across time. The problem of social control is a central theme in many of Curtis's films. His earlier work—*The Power of Nightmares*, *The trap*, *All watched over by machines of loving grace*, and *Bitter lake*—focus upon well-intentioned politicians employing political ideas to make society more stable and reasonable. As I suggested, these intentions are undermined by complexity. The ideas and the politicians themselves have been far too inflexible to be effective. As a consequence, instead of a stable and better world we find its obverse, a world marked by increasing confusion, instability, rising inequality, and more empowered elites. Yet the problem, for Curtis, is not so much political ideas themselves—his work does not lead to neo-anarchist forms of politics in which individuals express themselves in fluid social arrangements. Rather, I think, he has tended to point to the need for a more robust and dynamic sphere for political ideas.

In *HyperNormalisation*, however, this emphasis upon well-intentioned but flawed political elites begins to fade. *HyperNormalisation* is Curtis's most pessimistic film (it is one of the few of his films that includes no images of dancing), particularly when read alongside Yurchak, whose concept Curtis borrows. In Yurchak's hands, hypernormalisation is uncannily optimistic when compared with Curtis. As I stated, the film concludes with the figures of cynical political elites, Putin and Trump, and the confusing reality produced by their public relations machines. If we think with Curtis, we find ourselves in a more dire situation than ever before. Power now disappears behind a public relations veil, if it exists in any conventional sense to persuade, seduce, threaten, and so on, and is replaced by a confusing simulation of power. As such, power paradoxically becomes more destructive. In this confusing and unchecked form an authoritarian and extreme nationalism has begun to take hold. In its pessimism, *HyperNormalisation* bears a striking resemblance to Baudrillard's later work. In this, Baudrillard points to a new form of cynicism emerging within politics. No longer requiring to be shored up by objective measures of the social world, and no longer adapted to democratic impulses (such as in Dean 2009, pp. 25-30), politics becomes ever more contemptuous. Inflexibility has been overtaken by disdain. Putin and Trump loom large on this horizon. As Baudrillard puts it in a different, yet corresponding situation:

Truth must be on the side of Good. There can be no intelligence on the side of Evil. Yet all those who outdo themselves with arrogance (Le Pen), cynicism (Le Lay), pornography (Abu Ghraib), mythomania

(Marie L.) unmask the truth of the system in their abuse of it. (2010, p. 39)

The truth of the system, from this perspective, is that political processes have become detached from power. Power now doesn't even bother to hide behind science to justify itself, as per Foucault's path-breaking account of the rise of the human sciences in *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (1977). And, as Baudrillard continues, with a chilling resemblance to the claims in *HyperNormalisation*, 'one can no longer counter the system in the name of one's own principles since the system has abolished them. The end of all critical negativity' (2010, p. 50).

Where does this leave us? If we follow Baudrillard, we must wait for the impending implosion of the system. The end of negativity means that the produced integral reality becomes increasingly paranoid and eventually exhausts itself. The impossible task of ultimate control across multiple fronts must catch up sooner or later. If we follow Curtis, and here he will part company with Baudrillard, the task is to find a way to politically engage with complexity, to sort through the real and the fake, and to overturn the iron cage of rationality. However, a clear version of what such a sorting and overturning entails is not forthcoming in his films. What we do find instead is the romantic figure of the heroic journalist, but perhaps such a figure is long overdue.

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