

By Ovul Durmusoglu

“...the archive [...] determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities.”

- Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1972, London: Tavistock, and New York: Pantheon, 128.

“History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it – and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it.”

- Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 1981, New York: Hill and Wang, 65.

“Nothing Is.” - Sun Ra

I.

We were able to experience cinematic spectacle in the cinemas that hadn't yet been tucked inside shopping malls. I remember taking in the catchy iconography of the science fiction comedy *Back to the Future* (1985) starring Michael J. Fox in a popular cinema in Ankara where I grew up. A crazy professor named Doc Brown transforms a DeLorean DMC-12 into a time machine. The main protagonist Marty McFly finds himself instantaneously transported from 1985 to 1955 shortly after being introduced to the time machine by his friend. Marty spends his time in 1955 to better his family history – ultimately, in order to better his present. No wonder it was a favorite of the US president at the time, Ronald Reagan: the film's message is typical of 1980s Hollywood, espousing a good, happy American family and the preservation of social values based on that good family.

Back then, following the adventures of Marty McFly and Doc Brown (the box office success was expanded into a trilogy), I was mesmerized by the film's exciting drama of intervention in the flux of time and its notion of changing the course of things. In the first film, Doc Brown mentions the existence of parallel universes. With the archive of images and newspaper clippings at his laboratory, he shows how Marty is disappearing since he involuntarily intervened in his parents' meeting each other. Marty must take action to secure his own existence in the present. As the film evolves, we see photographic material changing in a state of appearances and disappearances according to the results of the actions committed by the protagonists.

Viewing these films today, one might begin to question such neo-liberal efforts to maintain the time continuum and the keen interest in preserving a society with its lineage

of certain morals in the past, present and future, back and forth. But let us read between the lines. How do we fit reality into a constructed projection of the future? *Back to the Future* is about a history in the making, a future being performed. The film suggests that we question our attachment to archives: accumulating, cataloguing, representing the traces, the past. Doesn't this remind us of a similar phenomenon from the censorship mechanisms of Stalinist times; how a figure might suddenly disappear from a photographic document according to the decisions of high ranking officials, thanks to a simple action of montage?

## II.

I came across a remarkable cross-referential text by Peter Friedl, in which he examines the essential relationship between the documentary image and what is called history.<sup>1</sup> To do this, he compares the image material of the "Twitter Revolution" against the Iranian presidential elections in 2009 with that against the Paris Commune in 1871. Questioning photography's role as the eye of history from an insightful and humorous perspective, Friedl demonstrates how the creation and dissemination of a certain image creates its own agenda and performs the moment creating a history, rather than the history it is supposed to document and stand for.

As we might recall, the world started hearing about the protests against the Iranian elections after the dissemination of Neda Agha-Soltani's filmed death through e-mails, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. Friedl directs our attention to the moment when a hysterical mass media found a photo of a woman with a similar name, Neda Soltani, on Facebook (probably thanks to the Google search engine) and how it was impossible to stop the found image of a still-living person from being used as the symbol of martyrdom in the name of democracy – even after the authentic photographs were provided. Fragments used over and over again without external validation demonstrate the uncontrollable desire for image consumption to prove reality. The performed agenda becomes another sort of aura in the contemporary sense that is shaped by the filters of dissemination – not how it is said but how it is heard. Again, it is a history in the making that images perform.

"Photography's melancholy is based on the fact that it shows something that once was and has meanwhile elapsed. By the power of its existence, it confirms that what one sees was actually there; to this extent, it is the epitome of standstill and enchantment," writes Friedl and asks, "What else is capable of stopping time?"<sup>2</sup> Friedl shatters assumptions surrounding documentation, subjectivity and reality when he reflects upon the existing image documentation of the Commune in 1871, such as the fact that the Commune did

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Friedl, "History in the Making," *e-flux journal* #18, September 2010.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

not have its own photographers *per se*, or that photographers like Eugène Appert profited from the photo montages he compiled to discredit the Commune. Similar moves and mentalities worked in terms of documenting a scene, spreading the information, creating the agenda and gripping the masses. The issue of what kind of images were decided to be produced, by whom and under what circumstances turn out to be the equivalents of our present condition consumed by a hysteria of fragments.

### III.

In his book *Militant Modernism* (2009), prolific writer Owen Hatherley takes the 1960s architectural vernacular of his hometown Southampton as a starting point and in the course of four interconnected chapters on brutalism in Britain, Soviet cinema theory and Bertolt Brecht, challenges our well-known rants about Modernism as being alienated, unsexed and totalitarian and points us instead towards a reading of Modernism as a counter-culture and important aspect of Leftist thought. In his chapter on the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* [English: alienation effect], he notes its origin in the theater's need to debate with cinema and radio with their ability to reach greater audience; that it is “nothing but a retranslation of the methods of montage – so crucial in radio and film – from a technological process to a human one. It is enough to point out that the principle of Epic Theatre, like that of montage, is based on interruption.”<sup>3</sup>

This comment on the alienation effect took me back to theories of montage: alienation and engagement processed through editing. It was Sergei Eisenstein who posited that montage was the essence of cinema, re-positioning it as a symbolically loaded action of engagement. He proposed a new editing form, the "montage of attractions" – in which arbitrarily chosen images, independent from the action, would be presented not in chronological sequence but in whatever way would create the maximum psychological impact. For Eisenstein, editing involved the audience more than the passive reception of information from static and lengthy shots and could drive the audience into a frenzy through the dynamism of the rhythm of images.

“DON'T STARE SO ROMANTICALLY” challenged an early play of Bertolt Brecht, demanding critical engagement of its audience. The power of montage comes from the superimposed element that disrupts the context into which it is inserted. Taken a step further, montage can be read as a gesture that engages through performing the context. In Susanne Kriemann's publications, montage resurfaces as an artistic method, presenting archived materials and allowing an open end to the relationship between historical objects and their various interpretations. One such “open” example is her artist book *12 650 000*, in which her combination of archival images with her own photographs allows for a critical view of the object and sets the rhythm of its narration. The book, which was

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<sup>3</sup> Owen Hatherley, *Militant Modernism*, London: Zero Books, 2009, 101.

printed in a limited edition of 100 + 10, opens with historical photographs documenting the construction of the 12,650,000 kilogram-heavy *Schwerbelastungskörpers* [English: heavy load body] in Berlin-Tempelhof, which was built to test the resilience of the ground for the gargantuan “Germania” project that Adolf Hitler and Albert Speer planned for the capital city, and which stands intact to this day. Kriemann cinematographically repeats one archival image showing the completed object 380 times on each page. At the end of the book, one of her own photographs depicts the object obscured by scaffolding during its renovation in 2007.

Such gestures clearly fracture linearity of the book, questioning the multiple relationships that arise from the images grouped together. They motivate readers to think in terms of fragments, pushing them to imagine possible re-connections between those fragments. Their rhythm of appearance, as well, should not be ignored, but rather intrigue the reader further. Do such gestures fill in the gaps intentionally left open by the archiving state of mind? Or do they create an exclusive layer of a narrative “in-the-making” that proposes another sort of relation altogether with time and its documents? In both cases, an encounter with *12 650 000* invites the curious to participate and perform the references and fragments proposed by the artist. No thing is complete.

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Susan Hiller, ‘The Provisional Texture of Reality (On Andrei Tarkovsky)

‘A space station on a planet called Solaris is in trouble. Solaris is composed entirely of liquid – it appears to be an ocean, constantly in motion. A new arrival, a psychologist, is supposed to investigate what’s wrong at the space station, since over many years there has been a failure to discover much about the planet through scientific means. The psychologist learns that, at some point, the planet began to create beings that simply appear, suddenly, in the space station. And there they stay.

The astronaut-scientists living there call them ‘visitors’.

The scientists now believe this ocean/plant is a sentient being (this is an early prefiguring of the Gaia theory), a being that senses the presence of other sentient beings. The plant appears to be trying to make contact with the humans by providing replicas of people from their own pasts.

The visitors are exact replicas, made of neutrinos, of human beings the astronauts have known on earth, but generated only from their most guilty and shaming memories. There is nothing sinister or harmful about the alien visitors except that their very existence calls

into question the notions of reality, memory, time, etc. that the humans have brought into space with them.

The visitors provoke a deep sense of horror, because they are not human and therefore not 'real', although they try to be. The scientists are (understandably) completely preoccupied by the effort of dealing with their guilty pasts, of which their visitors are a constant reminder. And they are equally overwhelmed by the problem of how to relate to the visitors. (Should they experiment on them? Destroy them? Treat them like real people?) When they have time, they try to formulate philosophical positions from which to understand this new world of memory and virtual reality. There are numerous conversations among the three scientists about the morality of science, the rationale of space exploration, the nature of memory, identity and the meaning of love.'