

Boris Groys

Video today is the medium of all media: it dominates news, online networks, art and ideological or religious propaganda. In his three video collages on iconoclasm, ritual and immortality, Boris Groys (East Berlin, 1947) reveals himself as an authentic medium of ambivalent rituals of the word and the image that constitute our culture.

THINKING IN LOOP



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BORIS GROYS: THINKING IN VIDEO

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Video today is the medium of all media: sophisticated or domestic, from CNN and MTV to the amateurs on YouTube, Instagram or TikTok, videos are produced and distributed in the billions on social media. Video dominates news, advertising, political, ideological or religious propaganda, and art as well. And its images in movement are increasingly seen in the placid calm of the museum.

In the three videos of *Thinking in Loop*, Boris Groys reveals himself, in this his first exhibition among us, as the refined philosopher, art critic and theoretician of media he already is, but also as an authentic medium of the medium of all media, intelligently staging the ambivalent rituals of word and image that constitute our culture.

This exhibition is an audio-visual installation where the philosopher, curator and artist has appropriated fragments of films and documentaries, combining each of the resulting three film collages with an oral essay. The video collages, produced from 2002 to 2007, were published by ZKM (Zentrum für Kultur und Medientechnologie) in Karlsruhe in 2008.

The images of *Iconoclastic Delights*, *Immortal Bodies* and *The Religion as Medium* do not merely communicate or illustrate theoretical content; rather, they use it as an accomplice to think in video, making ideas come alive with images in movement in an ongoing loop. *Thinking in Loop* is an exercise carried out equally by conceptual art and “audio-visual philosophy” (Peter Weibel), which cures images and voices, both our own and of others, and is uniquely concerned with the ubiquitous media bubble our lives are lived out in.

Boris Groys (East Berlin, 1947) studied philosophy and mathematics at what was then the University of Leningrad, where he came to work as a scientific assistant. Together with Ilya Kabakov, Andréi Monastyrski, Dmitri Prígov and Erik Bulatov, amongst others, during the Soviet regime Groys was a leading member of the circles of non-official intellectuals

and artists in Leningrad and Moscow. In 1981 he was forced to emigrate to the Federal Republic of Germany, where he began to publish his works and was employed as an instructor at the University of Münster. In 1994 he received a full professorship in Philosophy, Art Theory and Communication Media at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Karlsruhe. He is currently Global Distinguished Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University. A philosopher, media theoretician and art critic, he is the author of some twenty masterful books—“Boris Groys produces more provocations, more paradoxes per page than any other critic”, stated James Elkins—, from *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* (1988) [*The Total Art of Stalinism*, 1992], which led to international recognition, to *In the Flow* (2016). His publications include *Unter Verdacht. Eine Phänomenologie der Medien* (2000) [*Under Suspicion: A Phenomenology of Media*, 2012], and *Über das Neue. Versuch einer Kulturökonomie* (1992) [*On the New*, 2014], which constituted the initial calling card for the work of Boris Groys in the Spanish intellectual world. In 2020, in conjunction with this exhibition, the Catalan and Spanish translations of some of his essays on the logic of collection and digital art will be published.

Boris Groys has also curated exhibitions, such as *La Ilustración total. Arte conceptual de Moscú, 1969-1990*, with Manuel Fontán del Junco and Max Hollein in 2008 at the Fundación Juan March, Madrid and the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt. As an artist, besides *Thinking in Loop*, which he presents at La Virreina Centre de la Imatge for the first time in this country (it has only been exhibited in 2008 at apexart, New York, and Cubitt Gallery, London), Groys has also produced and collaborated on various sound pieces and performances.

*THINKING IN LOOP
THREE VIDEOS ON ICONOCLASM,
RITUAL & IMMORTALITY*

Boris Groys

Introduction

These video collages were produced between 2002 and 2007. Each of the three videos combines a text written by myself and images from films, clips from various feature films and documentaries. At first glance the spectator will be reminded of those videos and short films used to illustrate the news, enhance religious or ideological propaganda and be projected in schoolrooms. There is no doubt about it: today video has replaced text and has become the leading vehicle for the transmission of any kind of information. It is no accident that nowadays radical religious movements use video and not text to propagate their ideas. MTV videos determine the evolution of contemporary pop culture and, with YouTube, the format of home video has imposed itself as the primary medium with which to share ideas or images with the entire world.

The three videos on *Thinking in Loop* seem to correspond to this pattern, as at first sight text seems to have a more prominent role than the image. The images seem to be merely illustrations of the texts that the author reads out loud. Yet in fact, the subject of these texts are the videos themselves: the images seen in them, the frequency of their repetition, the specific forms which in each one of them the dream of attaining immortality through repetition is expressed. At the same time, the visual material used in the videos does not make reference to what is being read. Although associations and parallels could be found between texts and images, there are also contrasts and ruptures between them. In them, the image is not called into the service of a greater understanding of the text, nor does it serve to test certain theoretical positions. Rather, these videos produce a certain hiatus between what we hear and what we see in them, so that it is almost impossible to follow image and text simultaneously. Therefore, what the videos

do is problematise the relationship, habitually taken for granted, between image and text, a relationship which structurally defines the format of video. These videos do not transmit information; in fact, what they do is reflect upon the difficulties in the transmission of information itself. The three texts deal with these very difficulties; in turn, the videos are presented as vehicles of self-reflection. There are points of correspondence between texts and images, although, all told, they continue to be heterogeneous.

This heterogeneity is reinforced by the fact none of the three videos reveals where the film material making them up comes from. The reason for this is simple: the film clips in these videos are given an essentially new function and are integrated into an entirely different whole, distinct from what they originally had; the material chosen has been separated fully from the place it was originally found. In them the author employs a resource, appropriation, that is quite common in the world of art but not as widely used in the film industry. The reason for the divergence between these two uses is obvious: while a film is the product for the masses and is in free circulation in the market, these three videos, in contrast, have been produced specifically for an exhibition—for something that takes place in the world of art—and are part of a show whose character is that of an artistic installation. The very word *installation* alludes to the fact that, in this case, the images have been installed and do not move about freely, making it possible to use appropriation procedures on them that are similar to those employed in the terrain of art.

These videos attempt a reflection on the relationship between image and word in our world, being a world dominated by communication media. In this regard, they pertain to the tradition of conceptual art, which seeks to question the dividing line between art and its commentary.

Iconoclastic Delights

Film has never stood in a sacred context. From its very inception film proceeded through the murky depths of profane and commercial life, always a bedfellow of cheap mass

entertainment. Even the attempts to sacralize film undertaken by twentieth-century totalitarian regimes never really succeeded—all that came out was the short-lived enlistment of film for their propaganda purposes. The reasons for this are not necessarily to be found in the character of film as a medium: film simply arrived too late. By the time film emerged, culture had already shed its potential for sacralization. So, given cinema's secular origins it would at first sight seem inappropriate to associate iconoclasm with film. At best, film appears capable only of staging and illustrating historical scenes of iconoclasm, but never of being iconoclastic itself.

What nonetheless can be claimed is that throughout its entire history as a medium film has waged a more or less open struggle against other media such as painting, sculpture, architecture, and even theater and opera. These can all boast of sacred origins that within present-day culture still afford them their status as high, aristocratic arts. Yet the destruction of precisely these high aristocratic cultural values has been repeatedly depicted and celebrated in film. So, cinematic iconoclasm operates less in relation to some religious or ideological struggle than it does in terms of the conflict between different media; this is an iconoclasm conducted not against its own sacred provenance but against other media. By the same token, in the course of the long history, of antagonism between different media, film has earned the right to act as the icon of secular modernity.

In historical terms the iconoclastic gesture has never functioned as an expression of a consistent aesthetic or skeptical attitude. Such an approach is mirrored more in dispassionate curiosity towards a plethora of religious aberrations, compounded by the well-meaning museum conservation of the historical evidence of such aberrations—and it is certainly not accompanied by the destruction of this evidence. By contrast, the desecration of ancient idols is performed only in the name of other, more recent gods. Iconoclasm's purpose is to prove that the old gods have lost their power and are subsequently no longer able to defend their earthly temples and images.

Now, as a medium of motion, film is frequently eager to display its superiority over other media, whose greatest accomplishments are preserved in the form of immobile cultural treasures and monuments, by staging and celebrating the destruction of these monuments. At the same time, this tendency also demonstrates film's adherence to the typically modern faith in the superiority of *vita activa* over *vita contemplativa*. Every kind of iconophilia is ultimately rooted in a fundamentally contemplative approach and in a general readiness to treat certain objects deemed sacred exclusively as objects of distant, admiring contemplation. This disposition is based on the taboo that protects these objects from being touched, from being intimately penetrated and, more generally, from the profanity of being integrated into the practices of daily life. In film nothing is deemed so holy that it might or ought to be safeguarded from being absorbed into the general flow of movement. Everything film shows is translated into movement and thereby profaned. In this respect, film manifests its complicity with the philosophies of praxis, of Lebensdrang, of the *élan vital* and of desire; it parades its collusion with ideas that, in the footsteps of Marx and Nietzsche, mesmerized the imagination of European humanity at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries—in other words, during the very period that gave birth to film as a medium. This was the era when the hitherto prevailing attitude of passive contemplation capable of shaping ideas rather than reality was displaced by celebration of the potent movements of material forces. In this act of worship film plays a central role. From its very inception film has celebrated everything that moves at high speed—trains, cars, airplanes—but also everything that goes beneath the surface—blades, bombs, bullets.

Likewise, from the moment it emerged film has used slapstick comedy to stage veritable orgies of destruction, demolishing anything that just stands or hangs motionlessly, including traditionally revered cultural treasures. Designed to provoke all-round laughter in the audience, these movie scenes of destruction, wreckage and demolition are reminiscent of

Bakhtin's theory of carnival that both emphasizes and affirms the cruel, destructive aspects of carnival. Of all preceding art forms, it is no surprise that the circus and the carnival were treated with such positive deference by film in its early days. Bakhtin described the carnival as an iconoclastic celebration that exuded an aura of joy rather than serious, emotional or revolutionary sentiment; instead of causing the violated icons of the old order to be supplanted by the icons of some new order, the carnival invited us to celebrate the downfall of the status quo.

At the same time Bakhtin's carnival theory also emphasizes just how inherently contradictory iconoclastic carnivalism is in film. Historical carnivals were participatory, offering the entire population the chance to take part in a festive form of collective iconoclasm. But once iconoclasm is used strategically as an artistic device, the community is automatically excluded—and becomes an audience. Indeed, while film as such is a celebration of movement, it paradoxically drives the audience to new extremes of immobility compared to traditional art forms. So while it is possible to move around with relative freedom while one is reading or viewing an exhibition, in the movie theater the viewer is cast in darkness and glued to a seat. The situation of the moviegoer in fact resembles a grandiose parody of the very *vita contemplativa* that film itself denounces, because the cinema system embodies precisely that *vita contemplativa* as it surely appears from the perspective of its most radical critic—an uncompromising Nietzschean, let us say—namely as the product of a vitiated lust for life and dwindling personal initiative, as a token of compensatory consolation and a sign of individual inadequacy in real life. As Gilles Deleuze correctly observes, film transforms its viewers into spiritual automata: film unfurls inside the viewer's head in lieu of his own stream of consciousness. Yet this reveals film's fundamental character to be deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, film is a celebration of movement, the proof of its superiority over all other media, on the other, however, it places its audience in a state of unparalleled physical and mental immobility. It is this ambivalence

that dictates the majority of filmic strategies, including iconoclastic strategies.

Criticism of audience passivity first led to various attempts to use film as a means of activating a mass audience, of politically mobilizing or injecting movement into it. Sergei Eisenstein, for instance, was exemplary in the way he combined aesthetic shock with political propaganda in an endeavor to rouse the viewer and wrench him from his passive, contemplative condition. But later-day cinema is not revolutionary any more, even if it still feeds off the tradition of revolutionary iconoclasm. Since the currently dominant humanistic iconography has placed humanity itself in the foreground, the iconoclastic gesture is now inevitably seen as the expression of radical, inhumane evil, the work of pernicious aliens, vampires and deranged humanoid machines. The traditional iconoclastic gesture is now increasingly ascribed to the realm of entertainment. Disaster epics, movies about aliens and the end of the world, and vampire thrillers are generally perceived as potential box-office hits—precisely because they most radically celebrate the cinematic illusion of movement.

As time passed, it became clear that it was precisely the illusion of movement generated by film that drove the viewer towards passivity. This marks the beginning of an iconoclastic movement against film, and consequently of the martyrdom of film. This iconoclastic protest has the same root cause as all other iconoclastic movements; it represents a revolt against a passive, contemplative mode of conduct waged in the name of movement and activity. But where film is concerned, the outcome of this protest might at first sight seem somewhat paradoxical. Since film images are actually moving images, the immediate result of the iconoclastic gesture performed against film is petrification and an interruption of the film's movement. The instruments of film's martyrdom are various new technologies such as video, computer, and DVD. These new technological means make it possible to arrest a film's flow at any moment whatsoever, providing evidence that a film's motion is neither real nor material,



Film still from the film *Iconoclastic Delights* (2002), video collage, 19 min 41 s



Film still from the film *The Religions as Medium* (2006), video collage, 24 min 37 s

but simply an illusion of movement that can equally well be digitally simulated. Moreover, the information technology is constantly changing nowadays—hardware, software—simply everything. Already because of that the filmic image is also transformed with every act of visualization using a different, new technology. Today's technology thinks in terms of generations—we speak of computer generations, of generations of photographic and video equipment. But where there are generations, there are also generation conflicts, Oedipal struggles. Anyone who attempts to transfer his or her old text files or image files onto new software can experience the power of the Oedipus complex over current technology—many things are lost in the process, many things are destroyed, many things get lost in darkness, become obscure. The biological metaphor says it all: Not only life that is notorious in this respect, but also technology, which supposedly opposes nature, has become the medium of non-identity. And beyond that: The film if it is running on the TV, or in the exhibition space, or on the computer screen can be not only interrupted but also overlooked.

In our culture we have two fundamentally different models at our disposal that give us control over the time we spend looking at an image: the immobilization of the image in the museum or the immobilization of the viewer in the movie theater. Yet both models founder when moving images are transferred into the exhibition space or in the space of everyday life. Today, the film becomes—at least partially—invisible. Or to say it in another way: the film became iconoclastic toward itself.

Religion as Medium

In our present post-Enlightenment culture, religion is generally understood to mean a collection of certain opinions. Correspondingly, religion is usually discussed in the context of a demand for a freedom of opinion guaranteed by law. Religion is tolerated as an opinion so long as it remains tolerant and does not question the freedom of other opinions—that is to say, as long as it makes no exclusive, fundamentalist claim

to its own truth. Thus religion seems to be in a quite comfortable situation. It is no longer, as it was in the dark times of the radical Enlightenment, criticized, ironized, or even combated in the name of scientific truth. Rather, scientific truth itself has since acquired the status of mere opinion. At least since Nietzsche, and especially thanks to Michel Foucault, we now know that the claim to scientific truth is dictated primarily by the will to power, and it must, therefore, be deconstructed and deterred. Scientific opinions circulate in the same media and in the same way as religious opinions. Opinions in both cases come to us as news that is disseminated by the mass media. Sometimes we read about a new apparition of the Mother of God; sometimes we read that the Earth is getting warmer. Neither piece of information can be tested directly by those who hear it. The experts always disagree in such cases. Hence either bit of news can be believed or not.

Consequently our culture today knows no truths, be they of religious or scientific nature, but only opinions, whose dignity is, however, inviolable, because it is protected by law. The various opinions are either shared or rejected by autonomous citizens. Thus the value of an opinion can be measured precisely by determining how many people share it. The market of opinions is constantly being studied, and the results of this research tell us which opinions belong to the mainstream and which are marginal. This data offers a reliable basis for each individual's decision how he or she wishes to draw up the budget of his or her opinions. Those who wish to be compatible with the mainstream will adopt opinions that are either already part of the mainstream or have a chance to become so in the near future. Those who prefer to be thought of as representatives of a minority can seek out a suitable minority. Those who speak of a revival of religion today clearly do not mean anything like the second coming of the Messiah or even that new gods and new prophets have appeared. Rather, they mean that religious opinions have moved from marginal zones to the mainstream. If that is true, and statistics seem to confirm that assumption, then the question arises what could have caused religious opinions to become mainstream.

The survival and dissemination of opinions on the free market is regulated by a law that Darwin formulated: the survival of the fittest. The opinions that are best adapted to the conditions under which they are disseminated will automatically have the best odds of becoming mainstream. The market of opinions today, however, is clearly dominated by reproduction, repetition, and tautology. The standard diagnosis of today's civilization is that, over the course of the modern age, theology was replaced by philosophy, an orientation toward the past by an orientation toward the future, tradition by subjective evidence, fidelity to origins by innovation, and so on. In fact, however, the modern age was not the age in which the sacred was abolished but the age of its dissemination in profane space, its democratization, its globalization. Once ritual, repetition, and reproduction were matters of religion; they were practiced in isolated, sacred places. In the modern age ritual, repetition, and reproduction have become the fate of the entire world, the entire culture. Everything reproduces itself—capital, commodities, technology, art. Even progress is ultimately reproductive; it consists in a constantly repeated destruction of everything that cannot be reproduced quickly and effectively enough. People like to talk about innovation and change, but in fact they are referring almost exclusively to technological innovations.

Innovation in the realm of opinion can occur only if people not only believe it is possible to recognize the truth but also expect it, strive for it. As noted above, however, our post-Enlightenment culture does not believe in truth. Truth claims are seen as advertising gimmicks, as a pushy and hence disagreeable sales strategy, as deceptive packaging par excellence. Or worse: as totalitarian coercion, as an order to share an opinion even if one doesn't really want to, as an insidious attack on freedom and the dignity of the consumer. Under such conditions religion clearly has better odds to succeed on the market of opinions than philosophy or science does, for two reasons. First, the historical religions are established brands. For that reason alone they are more effective at reaching people than philosophical or scientific doctrines. Whatever

people might say, Christ, Muhammad, and the Buddha are genuine superstars. Not even Plato or Descartes can measure up to them, to say nothing of today's philosophers. If you want to succeed on the market of opinions, you are thus well advised to appeal to the founders of religions. The universities still bristle at this, but it is only a matter of time before they abandon their resistance. There is, however, another—if you will, deeper, weightier—reason to turn to religion. Religion can indeed be seen as a certain set of opinions, to the extent this refers to the role of religion in profane space. There religion is associated with opinions about whether contraception should be permitted or women should wear headscarves. All religions, however, have another space: sacred space. And religions have a different attitude toward this space—namely, the view that it is the space of a lack of opinion, of opinionlessness. For the will of the gods or God is ultimately hidden to the opinions of mortals. And that means that while people in our culture are first and foremost holders of certain opinions, religion is a place where this task, this mediality of human beings is reflected on—and precisely because religion marks and describes the state of opinionlessness, the zero level of freedom of opinion. Just as Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1913) symbolized this for the medium of painting, because it caused all figuration to disappear, so the sacred places of religions are the places where the mediality of the human being can be thematized, precisely because they are places where people lose all their opinions and find themselves once again in a state without opinions. As men without opinions, they practice repetition tout court, that is, the kind of repetition that is no longer repetition of a certain opinion but rather a ritual of the opinionlessness. That is what the hero of Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Nostalgia* (1983) does when he finds himself in a state of a total lack of opinion; he begins by going back and forth on the same path. This path does not by any means bring the hero forward—however “forward” might be meant here. Rather, by so doing the hero connects to the movement back and forth whose very radically solitary, inescapable repetitiveness marks him as a medium of this lack of opinion.

The experience of a lack of opinions, which is a genuinely religious experience, is not necessarily tied to certain places, however. This situation of a lack of opinions is much more common and more ordinary experience than is usually assumed. Such an experience occurs, for example, when people are confronted with a situation in which all existing opinions fail. The same situation can, however, also arise when people no longer want to have opinions, when they have definitely had enough of opinions as such, the market of opinions, and the creation and dissemination of opinions. When they suddenly notice that all existing opinions cancel one another out. Then they find themselves on the zero level of freedom of opinion again—and become conscious of their own mediality. The freedom of opinion becomes the abandonment of opinion: people are equally free of all opinions, all opinions equally abandoned. What are they to do then? How are they to react to this state of the complete abandonment of opinion? Religion and philosophy offer different answers to this question, or so it seems at first. Philosophy believes that in such cases people have to invent a new opinion, a new truth, to lead them out of the state of opinionlessness. Religion, by contrast, considers such a reaction too superficial and optimistic, because a person who thinks in religious terms anticipates from the outset the next step in which the new truth is absorbed by the market of opinions. Instead, religion offers another solution: insisting on this lack of opinion, connecting to the long history of the absence of opinions that is, ultimately, the history of religion. Religious people are not people of opinions, representatives or producers of opinions; rather, they are media people, people as media.

Caring for the lack of opinion—whether of individuals or a collective—demands a special place, a heterotopia, as Foucault called it. This is a place outside the space of opinion, outside the market of opinions. There the distinction between true and false and between good and evil is neutralized. But that is precisely what makes so distinct the lime between the quotidian market of opinions and a sacred lack of opinions. Those who advocate certain opinions can easily

position themselves in public space. Those who insist on a lack of opinions, however, need a different space, namely, a sacred space, and another time, the repetitive time of ritual. Thus it is also inevitable that they connect to certain places in rituals that in the past were defined as other, sacred places, as heterotopias. Those who enter such spaces and participate in such rituals leave their opinions at the coatroom by the door. The space of the temporary suspension of all opinions needs an outer boundary in order to guarantee its freedom from opinion.

Hence this lack of opinion is first and foremost conservative. It remains the same through time, whereas opinions change with time. The resulting aversion to all possible opinions often seems intolerant and even irrational, because it is difficult to justify rationally. The question is often asked what it really means to want to be religious. What objectives are set, what opinions does one want to assert? The answer is: to finally be rid of objectives and opinions altogether. Or, to put it another way, to find oneself, to free oneself from the obligation to have opinions, the servitude to opinions and objectives—to celebrate one's pure mediality, one's pure ability to reproduce and be reproduced. Now, however, it gets difficult when the traditional sacred places are lost, when the reflection on one's own mediality no longer has a place or time. At that moment the effect of the religious impulse is no longer conservative but instead extremist. Because when sacred spaces are lost or go unprotected, they have to be created by force. A piece of territory has to be reclaimed from the global market of opinions in order to create another space, a heterotopia. Then one subjects oneself to violence and transforms one's own body into a site of the sacred, a place of the silent, repetitive martyrdom, as happens, for example, in Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Or the cross is used as a weapon, as in Roberto Rodriguez's film *From Dusk till Dawn* (1996), to defend the human body, which is also shown as a silent body, as a place of indifference and boredom with respect to all conviction or ideology—as a body beyond all opinion.

Thus to the extent that religion is the site of a revelation of the mediality of humanity, religion can be understood as the avant-garde of our present world, determined as it is by the mass media, just as the artistic avant-garde functioned as the revelation of the mediality of art. Yet the interest of the mass media in religion is not simply a theoretical one, for the revelation of the mediality of human beings is also an event, a piece of news, that can and should be communicated. Without the mass media this news would be suppressed; the revelation would remain secret. Sites of the sacred are by definition closed, hidden, dark places. And there are still such places in our globalized world. First, they include the still well protected sites of traditional religions. Second, ever new sites are emerging: of secret conspiracies, violent separations from the general public, places of dark individual and collective ecstasies.

These places incessantly draw the attention of the media, because it is precisely the hidden, closed, dark, and marginal that interests today's media. The media are quite naturally striving to bring the hidden and marginal to the light of the general audience. That is why the media are repeatedly fascinated and provoked by the inaccessibility of sacred rituals. For decades there have been novels written and films made about the secret love affairs of priests. Today it seems the da Vinci Code has been cracked once and for all, finally making Christ himself a star, a celebrity, who of course cannot be thought of as such without a disclosure. The mass media are constantly to outdo revelation by disclosure—and in doing so they demonstrate their essential repetitiveness. The greatest opportunity open to the mass media is a new good message, a new good news, which is that things are announced to the mainstream that were once marginal and hidden. It is constantly writing a new Gospel that may perhaps contradict the old gospel on the level of opinion but nonetheless repeats the familiar ritual of revelation. The machinery of disclosure in the mass media today is merely the technical reproduction of the religious ritual of revelation. Religion is an ur-medium that always celebrates its return when news is disseminated and believed.

The Immortal Bodies

In our present time, one feels somewhat embarrassed when speaking or writing of immortality, in particular the immortality of individual. You feel you have to explain how on Earth you came up with such an odd—even kitsch—topic. Today the individual's immortality seems a more appropriate theme for a Hollywood B-movie than for a seriously wrought philosophical lecture. This was not always the case. In the past, it wasn't considered uncomfortable to talk about immortality because people believed that the soul would outlive the body. Therefore, it was considered absolutely appropriate and reasonable to give thought, while still on Earth, as to where your soul would end up when you died. But above all, our ancestors would pose the question of which part of the soul is potentially immortal—and which mortal.

Philosophy has been for a long period of history nothing other than an attempt to anticipate the further life of the soul after death. In other words, to carry out a metanoia, that is, a transition from an innerworldly to an otherworldly perspective, from the perspective of the mortal body to that of the eternal soul. Metanoia is namely a starting point from which to become metaphysical, to attain a meta-position in relation to the world and thus to regard and think of the world as a whole. If the metanoia—the anticipation of one's own immortality—becomes impossible, the individual loses the ability to change perspective. In this case, the only starting point for an individual's thinking and praxis is the perspective with which every individual issued, through his inner nature and the terrestrial positioning of his body. If one is merely mortal, to escape one's position in the world is impossible.

Today though, as modern, post-Enlightenment individuals, we hold that God is dead and that the soul cannot outlive the body. Or to be more precise, we don't believe that such a thing as a soul can actually be differentiated from the body, separated—made independent. Correspondingly, we also don't believe that a change of perspective, a metanoia—that is, achievement of a meta-position in relation to the world—is possible. Of anyone who speaks today it is first asked where



Film still from *Immortal Bodies* (2007),
video collage and text, 28 min 47 s



Still from the film *Aelita*,
by Yakov Protazanov (1924)

he is from and from which perspective he speaks. Race, class, and gender serve as coordinates whereby the positioning of every voice is located. The concept of cultural identity, which stands at the centre of today's Cultural Studies, also serves this same initial positioning. Even though the relevant parameters and identities are interpreted as social constructs rather than "natural" determinants, this hardly invalidates their effect. It may perhaps be possible to deconstruct social constructions, but they cannot be abolished or deliberately replaced.

Still, it seems to me that the finitude of the soul does not yet mean that metanoia is impossible. Even in modernity there has been no perfect synchronization of body and soul: both remain hetero-chronic and thus separable, even despite the loss of faith in the soul's immortality. Although we no longer speak of a disembodied soul, still we can and must speak of a soulless body, or a corpse. The soul may have no further life after the death of the body; however, the body certainly lives on after the soul passes away. Here we can definitely speak of a life after death, because a corpse is active throughout: after death it remains active, in that it elapses, decays, and decomposes. This process of decay is potentially infinite—one cannot definitively say when the process ends because the body's material substances remain identifiable for a long enough time. Even if the vestiges of the corpse can no longer be identified, it doesn't mean the body has disappeared, but simply that its elements—molecules, atoms, etc.—have dispersed throughout the world to such extent that the body has practically become one with the entire world. If you wish, it has become a body without organs. This unification with the cosmos, materially as well as spiritually, offers a perspective that makes possible another kind of metanoia. Instead of the immortality of the soul we achieve a different kind of immortality: the immortality of the body's material substances, the immortality of the body as a corpse. This corporeal immortality can be anticipated during one's own life as much as the eternal life of the soul was anticipated in the past. Perhaps here we can speak of a heteronoia, an anticipation of the body's rather than the soul's destiny in the afterlife. Moreover, we could even

argue that the concept of the corporeal immortality is older than the belief in the immortality of the soul: Egyptian rituals of mummification tell us nothing else.

I am speaking here of heteronoia after Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia. Once the soul has departed, the body as corpse is transported to a space other than the one it occupied during its life: the cemetery. Foucault rightfully considers the cemetery, along with the museum, the library and the boat—we could also add the garbage heap here—as “other” places, as heterotopiae. The body transcends the place where it resided during its lifetime, in that it has been brought to the cemetery. Thus occurs a pretty drastic change of perspective: looking out from a cemetery, a museum or a library, the world appears from a different—a heterotopic—perspective. In this way, it is possible for the individual to experience heteronoia, by thinking during his lifetime of his body as a corpse. Then we wouldn't ask where he is coming from, but where he will be brought after his death—and thus this heterotopic endpoint becomes the origin of his worldview.

Philosophy has been preoccupied for a long time with the metaphysics of the corpse—whether explicitly or implicitly. There is no other way of understanding the entire *Décadence* movement of the nineteenth century. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), Walter Benjamin describes allegory as a figure that represents the body's decay. Thus allegory, for Benjamin, differs favourably from the symbol: if the symbol tends to generate the effect of a living, animated presence, allegory represents the very process of the body getting rid of the soul. The concept of deconstruction as it was developed by Jacques Derrida could equally be thought of as a delineation of a “different” metanoia of this kind—namely as the thematisation of a post-death decomposition, already anticipated in life. We are talking here about the perpetual and everlasting decay of the body, which has neither beginning nor end. The “muselmann,” someone who has become almost a living corpse under the conditions of a concentration camp, as he is described by Giorgio Agamben in his book *Homo Sacer* is understood by the author as the embodiment of “bare life.”

Agamben declares the living corpse to be the carrier of true, genuine, pure life, from whose perspective social, “animated” life can only properly be apprehended. In a similar vein, these reflections can be applied to the characters that dominate today's mass cultural imagination, which is full of immortal bodies without souls. So vampires, zombies, clones and living machines—the miscellaneous undead—take pride of place in today's mass culture.

But in our culture the actual locations of physical immortality are our various archives—and in particular the museums. Works of art are the corpses of objects. In art museums, objects are kept and put on display after their death: after they have been defunctionalised, removed from the practice of life. The life of artworks in museums is a life after death, a vampiric life protected from the sunlight. At the same time, today's art museums demonstrate particularly clearly the difficulties confronting those who seek heteronoia. The aim of the European avant-gardes was and remains—even if today one repeatedly hears that the avant-garde is no more—to demonstrate the material, the purely corporeal, the *cadavérique*. Hand in hand with this aim, objects become removed from the context of their everyday use, use which has allowed their pure materiality, their corporeality—and reality of a corpse—to be overlooked. However, the viewing of art leads repeatedly to a lively communication with artworks—to an aesthetic experience, to interpretation, to historicisation, etc. Briefly: too many souls are projected onto artworks. Thus is heteronoia hindered: the viewer looks at the artwork from a worldly perspective, instead of changing perspective and beginning to observe the world from the perspective of the museum, that is, viewing the world as a corpse.

That is why contemporary art aims at making the corpse look increasingly corpse-like—in order to make impossible further projections of the soul onto works of art. Art today demonstrates an increasing degree of decay and decomposition, an increasingly radical volatile and transitory nature. On walking through the modern and contemporary art rooms of the museum, the stages of art's development appear

as stages of decay. First, the mimetic image disintegrates—the material substance of the work of art becomes evident. Then the body of the artwork itself begins to desintegrate. It suffers sawing, damage, dirt, reduction to a black square or a simple cube, all of which resist any attempt on the part of the spectator to see other than mere material objects—corpses. Then come performances, actions and projects, of whose corpses only some vague material traces still remain. These are presented in installations which, rather than being designed as complete bodies, are arranged as accumulations of body parts and can be rearranged, partially exchanged, or even completely replaced by different body parts.

The creation of icons of a radical, *cadavérique* profanity can of course only be successful for a short period of time, that period during which the violence with which a specific object was torn from the everyday still remains palpable. We know that Duchamp's urinal will never again find its place in the bathroom; Warhol's Campbell's soup will never return to the supermarket to be purchased and consumed and it leaves us with a feeling of infinite sadness. In this sense, Lenin's mausoleum in Moscow's Red Square is particularly characteristic: there, Lenin is put on display to prove that he is really dead and will never arise—at least as long as his corpse remains on view. The suspicion that resurrection is possible or might even have already occurred can only be taken into consideration when the corpse disappears. Lenin's corpse could thus be considered a readymade in the tradition of Duchamp—a readymade manifesting the finality of death. The classical metanoia gave legitimacy to the philosophers, at least in Plato's view, to govern the Polis, or the State. The Christian church has also long substantiated its claim for leadership through assertions of its ability to consider and judge finite, mortal activities on this Earth from the meta-perspective of the soul's immortality. Here the political dimension of the question of individual immortality and our capability for metanoia becomes very clear. In this respect, heteronia is no exception: the heterotopian gaze is simultaneously the gaze of power. But here the philosopher

becomes an artist—or better, a museum curator. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Russian philosopher Nikolay Fedorov developed the project of the “common cause,” which called upon the modern state to resurrect and make immortal, through science, all individuals who have ever lived upon the Earth. Fedorov used the art museum as a model for the utopian society of immortals he wanted to build. Here we have a heteronia involving an entire society, which would transform the entire societal space in a heterotopia. The state would become a museum of its own population, and every individual an artwork. As the museum's administrators bear responsibility not only for the collection's inventory but also for the perfect condition of each and every artwork, sending them for restoration if they are threatened by deterioration, so the state should bear responsibility for the resurrection and afterlife of each and every individual. The state should no longer allow individuals to die in private. It ought not to allow the dead lie in their coffins.

As Michel Foucault famously put it, the modern state can be defined by the maxim “it makes live and lets die”—as opposed to the earlier sovereign state, which “makes die and lets live.” During modernity, the natural death of the individual has been considered a private affair into which, as Foucault describes it, the state declines to intervene. What is most interesting about Fedorov's project is that it doesn't consider death a private affair. Rather, Fedorov takes with full seriousness the promise of the emerging bio-power—that is, the state's promise to take care of life as such; he calls upon the state to think and fulfil this promise to its logical end. Fedorov is primarily reacting to some of the contradictions inherent in the socialist teachings of the nineteenth century, which were taken up not only by himself, but also by other authors of his time, in particular by Dostoyevsky. Socialism promised a complete social justice, whilst simultaneously connecting this promise to the belief in progress. This belief implies that only future generations living in a fully developed socialist society will be able to enjoy complete social justice. In contrast, a role as the passive victims of progress is

foreseen for previous and current generations, and they can expect no justice in all eternity. Therefore future generations will get to enjoy socialist justice at the cost of their cynical acceptance of an outrageous historical injustice—namely the exclusion of all previous generations from the future society. Socialism thus functions as an exploitation of the dead for the benefit of the living—and as exploitation of those who live now for the benefit of those who will live later. The only possibility for socialism to construct a just society in the future is to aim to resurrect of all those generations that created the basis for its success. Those resurrected generations will thus be able to participate in the future socialism—and the provisory discrimination of the dead for the benefit of the living will finally be eliminated. The coming society, in order to be a just one, cannot remain only contemporary. This completed, future socialism must establish itself not only in space, but also in time, transforming the latter into eternity through technology. Before it can be considered just, a society must be not only international (that is, reaching across space) but also inter-generational (reaching across time).

Not for nothing did many Russian intellectuals and artists willingly take up Fedorov's ideas after the October revolution. In their first manifesto in 1922, representatives of the Biocosmic-Immortalist movement, a political group with origins in Russian anarchism, wrote the following: "For us, essential and real human rights are the right of being (immortality, resurrection, rejuvenation) and the right of mobility in the cosmic space (and not the alleged rights proclaimed in the declaration of the bourgeois revolution of 1789)." Thus Alexander Svyatogor, one of the main proponents of the Biocosmic-Immortalist movement, considered immortality to be both the aim of and the condition for the future communist society, for he believes that true social solidarity can be established solely among immortals. As long as each individual possesses a private "piece of time" actual private property cannot be abolished. A total bio-power, on the other hand, signifies not only the collectivisation of space but also of time. Only in eternity can the conflicts between the individual and society—insolvable in real

time—be successfully resolved. The goal of physical immortality is the highest goal for each individual, and only when society adopts this goal as its own will an individual remain forever loyal to society.

Indisputably among the most spectacular and far-reaching results of this program are the theories of rocket propulsion developed by Constantin Tsiolkovsky at the same time. Tsiolkovslcy actually aspired to the so-called "patrification of the sky": the colonisation of the cosmic space by humanity's soon-to-be immortal ancestors. Later on, his research became the starting point for the Soviet space travel. Another fascinating biopolitical experiment, albeit not quite so influential, was the Institute for Blood Transfusion founded and directed in the 1920s by Alexander Bogdanov. In his youth, Bogdanov was a close friend of Lenin's; he was also a co-founder of the intellectual-political wing of the Russian Social Democrat party, which later led to the emergence of Bolshevism. In the 1920s, Bogdanov became deeply enthusiastic about blood transfusion, which he expected would achieve a deceleration, if not the total annihilation, of the aging process. He thought that blood transfusions between younger and older generations would rejuvenate the latter, and simultaneously serve to balance out intergenerational solidarity. Incidentally, Bogdanov died during one of these transfusions.

For today's reader, the reports of Bogdanov's Institute for Blood Transfusion evoke first and foremost the novel *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. For example, in one purported case from Bogdanov's institute the blood of a young female student was partially exchanged "with the blood of an older writer," from which both were alleged to have benefited equally. This analogy is by no means coincidental. The society of vampires—of immortal bodies—described by Stoker is the society of a bio-power par excellence. However, the novel (written, by the way, in 1897, at the same time as Fedorov was developing his project of the "common cause") describes the regime of the total bio-power not as a utopia, but rather, as an anti-utopia. And so the "human" heroes of the novel bitterly defend their right to a natural death. Their fight against the

society of vampires, which establishes and guarantees physical immortality, has continued in Western mass culture ever since, although the temptations of vampiric seduction have never been completely suppressed. The rejection of physical immortality is certainly not new, to which the stories of Faust, Frankenstein and Golem well attest. Today's vampires though, as they are depicted in books and films, are not loners. They constitute a society built not only across nations but also across generations, a communist society of immortal bodies, in fact, such as Fedorov and Bogdanov had in mind. This is probably the very reason why such a strong resistance to this kind of society exists, as does the temptation to be part of it. To understand the radical bio-political imagination of our times, fixated as it is upon corporeal immortality, we should—it seems to me—read Fedorov, Bogdanov and Bram Stoker simultaneously.

Boris Groys, Thinking in Loop: Drei Videos über das Ikonoklastische, Rituelle und Unsterbliche / Three videos on Iconoclasm, Ritual and Immortality
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