

## A SUPERCUT OF SUPERCUTS: Aesthetics, Histories, Databases

A video essay by Max Tohline

<https://vimeo.com/440746435>

### TRANSCRIPT

Note: Video citations followed by an 11-character alphanumeric string (for example, FhCBU49alkY) indicate YouTube video IDs and may be accessed online by adding [youtu.be/](https://youtu.be/) before the character string (for example, [youtu.be/FhCBU49alkY](https://youtu.be/FhCBU49alkY)). Video citations followed by a solely numeric string (such as 247065497), indicate Vimeo video IDs and may be accessed online by adding [vimeo.com/](https://vimeo.com/) before the numeric string (as in [vimeo.com/247065497](https://vimeo.com/247065497)).

### PART 0. Introduction

Logo on screen: BAFTSS [British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies] Open Screens Journal

Text on screen: A video essay by Max Tohline

A Supercut of Supercuts

In mid-2017, Chevrolet aired this ad.

Clip: *Chevy Trucks: Celebrating A Century of Dependability* (Chevy, 28 Sep. 2017) [lhFqwuA4uQY]

[Clip audio, announcers: “We think it’s because Chevrolets are / the most dependable / dependable / dependable / dependable..”]

It’s a compilation of almost a century of their own advertisements. The editing hopscotches around an implicitly vast archive and seems designed to demonstrate the presence of an unquestionable corporate legacy. And if the comments on the YouTube page are any indication, that’s what the ad tapped into: fandom, desire.

Screenshots of user comments on above video.

About a year later, Timothy Burke of *Deadspin* put together this video.

Clip: *Sinclair’s Soldiers in Trump’s War on Media* (Deadspin, 2 Apr. 2018) [\_fHfgU8oMSo]

[Clip audio, news anchors: “Unfortunately, some members of the media use their platform to push their own personal bias and agenda to control exactly what the people think.”]

In it, dozens and dozens of so-called “local” television anchors recited, word-for-word, a script handed down from their owners at the Sinclair Broadcast Group.

[Clip audio, news anchors: “This is extremely dangerous to our democracy. / This is extremely dangerous to our democracy. / This is extremely dangerous to our democracy.”]

The internet responded with outrage that parroting these corporate talking points violated the public trust. Here, the editing offered analysis, proof.

Screenshots: Rather, D 2018, Facebook update, 2 April, viewed 2 April 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/24085780715/posts/lets-be-clear-news-anchors-looking-into-camera-and-reading-a-script-handed-down-/10160239588295716/>

Haberman, M 2018, Twitter update, 1 April, viewed 3 April 2018, <https://twitter.com/maggienny/status/980600512256110598?lang=en>

Despite the disparity of their purposes and raw materials, these compilation videos had something in common. They were supercuts.

Text on screen: SUPERCUTS

Clips: *80s Computer Hacking: A Supercut* (FoundItemClothing.com, 23 Jul. 2014) [rUGQHdYUIEo]

*Mary Poppins, Eliza Doolittle, and Julie Andrews' Oscar* (Be Kind Rewind, 13 Dec. 2018) [unqQM3nuO-o]

*The Wilhelm Scream* (Cinexcellence, 20 Apr. 2011) [Zf8aBFTVNEU]

*Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner Supercut* (The Royal Ocean Film Society, 16 Mar. 2018) [RK-I6LxXJsA]

*A Devastating Tribute to the Single Tear* (Nerdwriter1, 21 Mar. 2014) [7QPc73ASBXY]

*Lady Gaga saying 'there can be a hundred people in the room' for one minute straight* (The Fab Teacher, 8 Oct. 2018) [iRxsX\_30tjs]

*Holy Robin Compilation!* (tedfufu (David Irons), 13 Nov. 2009) [85LUuF6ZXaU]

*The Big Lebowski Fucking Short Version* (FUTURE, 4 Dec. 2006) [1jRhGnp-fNc]

*19 Waxing Scenes in Film and Television* (New York Magazine, 14 Nov. 2018) [jAaBF5IfVpE]

*Every Covid-19 Commercial is Exactly the Same* (Microsoft Sam, 15 Apr. 2020) [vM3J9jDoaTA]

*Iron Chef America - SECRET INGREDIENT* (MrEh, 9 Feb. 2010) [kXqY8EZ21-g]

*A Damn Good Coffee Tribute* (Anna Catley, 12 Jan. 2016) [FTLAhcm2ENS]

If you've been pretty much anywhere on the Internet since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, you've probably encountered a slew of supercuts, and you know that most are compiled from television or feature films. But they can be assembled from nearly any sort of footage – news footage, sports footage, home movies, video blogs, and practically any other form of visual media, from paintings to clip art to comic strips to Tweets.

Clips: *38 Seconds With Gustavo Almodovar* (AlmodovarGustavo, 3 Nov. 2008) [mk0wDbyKcSg]

*Goals that science can't explain* (SportsHD, 19 Mar. 2020) [BX3N0fA5aC0]

*dancing to the end of poverty* (Margaux Williamson, 2008)

*Supercut: Reaction Videos (turn down your headphones!)* (Slacktory, 1 Feb. 2012) [kOPQkW4eEBs]

*500 Years of Female Portraits in Western Art* (Philip Scott Johnson, 22 Apr. 2007) [nUDIoN-\_Hxs]

*787 Cliparts* (Oliver Laric, 2006)

*How Garfield Lost His Magic* (Quinton Reviews, 19 Jun. 2018) [hLJxgZpmWKc]

*Fahrenheit 11/9* (Michael Moore, 2018)

When Andy Baio coined the term 'supercut' in 2008 (Baio 2008), early examples like *I'm Not Here to Make Friends* and *Let's Enhance* hit the internet like something novel and special, racking up millions of views.

Clips: *I'm Not Here to Make Friends!* (richfofo (Rich Juzwiak), Jul 2, 2008) [w536Alnon24]

*Let's Enhance* (Duncan Robson, 2009) [reposted 2013, LhF\_56SxrGk]

Screenshot: Baio, A 2008 Fanboy Supercuts, Obsessive Video Montages, 11 April 2008. Available at [https://waxy.org/2008/04/fanboy\\_supercuts\\_obsessive\\_video\\_montages/](https://waxy.org/2008/04/fanboy_supercuts_obsessive_video_montages/) [Last accessed 3 December 2020].

But in the following decade, something changed. Between the moment that Baio set up his website dedicated to cataloguing examples, and the moment that that website went offline in 2015, the supercut had evolved from the province of niche fan remix communities and into a tool of both mainstream advertising and legitimate news analysis.

Screenshot: Internet Archive's Wayback Machine record for Supercut.org. Available at: [https://web.archive.org/web/\\*/supercut.org](https://web.archive.org/web/*/supercut.org) [Last accessed 3 December 2020].

Clips: *Chevy Trucks: Celebrating A Century of Dependability* (Chevy, 28 Sep. 2017) [lhFqwuA4uQY]  
*Sinclair's Soldiers in Trump's War on Media* (Deadspin, 2 Apr. 2018) [\_fHfgU8oMSo]

Call it a sign of the form's maturation or saturation, but the supercut has become such a staple of news analysis and late-night comedy that now it's not uncommon for two different programs to simultaneously produce supercuts of the very same thing. For instance, in the wake of Julian Assange's arrest when Donald Trump claimed to know nothing about *Wikileaks*, *Fox* and *The Washington Post* both assembled supercuts of 2016 Trump stump speeches that extolled the site.

Clips: *Opinion | Where's the love for WikiLeaks now, President Trump?* (Washington Post, 11 Apr. 2019) [Zl\_XXik3tCU]  
*Trump offers no opinion on WikiLeaks or Assange* (Fox News, 11 Apr. 2019) [IhxPnqhooJM]

Oh, and so did CBS, The Guardian, CNN, Mother Jones, the BBC, and NBC, twice.

Clips: *All the times President Trump praised WikiLeaks* (CBS News, 13 Apr. 2019) [QAglS7m6Kmg]  
*How Donald Trump spoke about WikiLeaks during 2016 presidential campaign* (Guardian News, 11 Apr. 2019) [7n7VyHbqkas]  
*Keilar: Trump doesn't know WikiLeaks? Roll the tape.* (CNN, Apr 11, 2019) [a7uZKxIsC-Y]  
*Trump's WikiLeaks Amnesia* (Mother Jones, 11 Apr. 2019) [x7gF357NR8o]  
*What Trump has said about Wikileaks - BBC News* (BBC News, 12 Apr. 2019) [BtLJE4cSFOO]  
*Trump Dodges Questions on Mueller, Tax Returns, WikiLeaks - A Closer Look* (Late Night with Seth Meyers, 11 Apr. 2019) [AcrYY-5PdGE]  
*Weekend Update - Julian Assange Arrested* (Saturday Night Live, 13 Apr. 2019) [zKpiRliQePY]

In fact, the supercut has become such a default evidentiary trope within the essay form that sometimes multiple miniature supercuts appear within a single video.

Clip: *You're watching Fox News. You just don't know it.* (Carlos Maza for Vox, 24 May 2019) [VzoZf4IAfAc]

Even in the world of fan-made supercuts that don't respond to current events, nowadays the form seems to proliferate on its own, as if it were self-replicating using content creators as hosts. The supercut is just 'in the air' now.

Clips: *#1 - Nightclubbing* (TROISCOULEURS, 11 Oct. 2017) [237734388]  
*Dancing in Movies - Supercut* (supercutonline, 2 Mar. 2014) [-JqjLSiWPPQ]  
*Daft Punk's "Get Lucky" - The Ultimate Dance Compilation* (Huffington Post UK, 24 May 2013) [-xSFKnldPQ8]  
*66 Movie Dance Scenes Mashup with Can't Stop the Feeling by Justin Timberlake* (Movie Remixer, 24 May 2016) [oAG7ECgXjcs]  
*Let's Dance* (bnewcol, 5 Jun. 2010) [ab9i0s4WEY0]  
*Dancing Movie montage* (Clara Darko, 21 Oct. 2010) [FhCBU49alkY]  
*Cinema 2017: The Dance* (Jacob T. Swinney, 12 Dec. 2017) [247065497]  
*100 Movies Dance Scenes Mashup* (Mark Ronson-Uptown Funk ft. Bruno Mars) (What's the Mashup, 10 Sep. 2015) [EmnSm\_d2ll4]

This duplication even appears in the case of very specific topics. Here are two supercuts of telephone calls in movies that were independently released exactly one day apart back in 2015. This despite the fact that in 2007 Apple ran a spot for the iPhone during the Oscars that did essentially the same thing; and despite the fact that that ad was an intentional remake of Christian Marclay's 1995 video

“Telephones,” one of the most notable forerunners of the modern supercut – despite all that – the creators behind the first video claimed that they’d never even heard of Marclay.

Clips: *Movie Phone Super Call* (Burger Fiction, 14 Sep. 2015) [139265123]

*The Movie Phone Montage - Movie Mashup* (Sebastien Kerroumi, 15 Sep. 2015) [139311546]

*Apple 'Hello' iPhone Commercial* - aired February 25, 2007, during the 79th Oscars telecast

*Telephones* (Christian Marclay, 1995)

Screenshot: comments on the Vimeo page for Burger Fiction’s *Movie Phone Super Call*. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/139265123>. [Last accessed 3 December 2020.]

When an idea assimilates itself into the DNA of a culture so completely that its ubiquity passes without comment and its leading practitioners can work oblivious to its history, that idea isn’t just a fad; it’s become ideological. And the idea of the supercut – to extract matching bits of footage from narrative or news and to arrange them into a list of clips demonstrating a category to which they belong or a trope from which they emerge – the ubiquity of that idea indicates a new mass mode of thinking about our shared visual history. Somewhere along the line, we stopped thinking of the archive as an archive – a storehouse preserving great works or important records – and we started to think of it as a database – a mass of raw material to be sorted as datapoints and queried like a search engine.

Text on screen: Supercuts embody a new mass approach to visual history...  
...namely, a shift from archive-thinking to database-thinking.

My name is Max Tohline, and this is *A Supercut of Supercuts*, a video essay in three parts.

Text on screen: a SUPERCUT of SUPERCUTS  
Aesthetics | Histories | Databases  
Max Tohline 2021

How the rise of database thinking happened is the central concern of this video. So by Part 3, I will argue that the database must be understood alongside much longer histories of the reciprocal interplay between technology and ideology. One cannot account for the rise of the supercut simply in terms of the technologies that made it possible; rather, I argue that the supercut is best understood as a kind of simulation of a database logic that had already assimilated itself into popular consciousness elsewhere.

Text on screen: Part 3: Databases [table of contents]

1:20:26 Concordance films  
1:22:30 The Google search as supercut  
1:23:53 “There Was a Child Went Forth”  
1:26:21 Thesis and contents  
1:27:28 Replacing chronology with history  
1:28:21 Database vs. narrative  
1:30:00 Database vs. archive  
1:30:33 From archive to database  
1:30:43 Prerequisites of the supercut  
1:32:46 What took so long? (TV news)  
1:41:46 Archives vs. Databases  
1:45:05 Walter Benjamin  
1:46:01 Converting to data  
1:46:44 Creating data  
1:47:32 Examples:

1:47:49	The movie-business documentary
1:50:27	Narrower, shorter, and more
1:52:12	Alan Berliner
1:55:13	Kiss, kiss, kiss
1:56:42	Database as ideology and power
1:57:59	Technology and ideology: Marx
1:59:20	Mechanical Turks & Potemkin AI
2:02:35	My search vs. CBVR
2:04:24	Warnings and Myths
2:07:57	Final thoughts for artists

Supercuts are human simulations of a database, and they indicate both the pervasiveness of database-thinking & the extent to which technologies are just as much ideas as objects.

In order to make that argument, I have to set out a much more complete history of the supercut than has yet been made available. Up to now, the histories of the supercut have treated it as a kind of top-down phenomenon— an idea that emerged in the avant-garde realm of fine art and was later adopted as a mode of vernacular remix. But that’s not at all what happened; what we now call the supercut took decades to emerge and popped up in multiple places at once, because the supercut is not just a novel mode of editing; it’s a new way of thinking about visual history expressed by a mode of editing. That history, or rather, that network of genealogical lines feeding into the modern supercut, will compose Part 2 of this essay.

Text on screen: Part 2: Histories [table of contents]

29:30	Introduction
30:58	It’s not avant-garde (and other errors), or:
31:08	Why Dara Birnbaum didn’t invent the supercut
33:41	And neither did the fanvid
39:06	And neither did <i>Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid</i>
42:40	And neither did Bruce Conner
46:17	The supercut at the convergence of various cultural series
47:45	Cinephilia before Marclay:
48:38	Varda, Workman, and Tornatore
52:22	Back to the 20’s
53:07	Ruttmann’s <i>Melody: The Cross-Section Film</i>
54:36	Superficial matching thereafter
55:18	Deeper connections: Vertov, Eisenstein, & Shub
59:21	Visual Culture: Gathering evidence of representation
1:02:55	A side trip through kinestasis
1:04:07	"Supercuts" in other forms of art
1:06:03	Gance's <i>Napoleon</i> , stillness, and image-grids
1:06:32	Stylistic cross-pollination and the city symphony
1:09:45	What proto-supercuts leave out
1:10:40	How to ‘supercut’ your own footage
1:11:15	Vorkapich montages
1:12:32	Serial narrative ellipsis vs. diegetic essayism
1:15:39	Outtakes, casting, and OuLiPo
1:17:35	Further back: The canon and the concordance

And in order to set up the driving forces of those histories, in Part 1 I will offer a few remarks on the aesthetics of the supercut. In particular, I will examine how it is that a supercut can function both

probatively and celebratorily – that is, how some supercuts can amass evidence for critical arguments while others just supply a steady stream of images for uncritical consumption. With the help of a brief excursion through semiotics, I'll show how the supercut exploits our natural interest in pattern recognition, explaining how stylistics in the editing may predispose our attention toward either of the opposing poles of analysis or cathexis.

Text on screen: Part 1: Aesthetics [table of contents]	
06:36	Defining the supercut
07:48	Fannish celebration (desire, cathexis)
08:42	Critical analysis
10:20	Pattern recognition and structuralism
11:09	Syntagmatic vs. Paradigmatic structures
12:23	Contextual meaning (word lists)
13:15	A Lumière example
14:37	The subtractivity of narrativity (North by Northwest)
15:37	Metz and film semiotics
16:49	<i>Final Cut: Ladies and Gentlemen</i>
17:19	Tracking action and motivation
18:27	Database-pleasures
20:35	Uncritical desire for matching images
21:09	The hazards of matching problematic things
22:37	Signs without Signification
23:39	Messenger vs. Marclay
25:10	Interrupting the spectacle: Hit by a bus
27:51	Conclusions

\* If you're more interested in the history of the supercut, please feel free to skip forward to 29:30 and begin there.

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## **PART 1. Aesthetics**

So let's begin with some definitions. In the time since Andy Baio coined the term "supercut" back in 2008, its definition has undergone some slippage, and to some people it has become synonymous with the compilation film in general. To others, it's just a derivative work with lots of editing in it. Since Baio offers a series of examples in lieu of a concrete definition,

Screenshot: Baio, A 2008 Fanboy Supercuts, Obsessive Video Montages, 11 April 2008. Available at [https://waxy.org/2008/04/fanboy\\_supercuts\\_obsessive\\_video\\_montages/](https://waxy.org/2008/04/fanboy_supercuts_obsessive_video_montages/) [Last accessed 3 December 2020].

Text on screen: \*a very supercutty thing to do, after all

for the purposes of this video essay, I will define a supercut as follows: A briskly-cut video list of appropriated moving images sharing some specific matching characteristic and offered as a representative cross-section of that characteristic.

Text on screen: A briskly-cut video list of appropriated moving images sharing some specific matching characteristic and offered as a representative cross-section of that characteristic.

In plain language, a supercut is a compilation of *that which is repeated* across a set of films or TV programs – tropes, clichés, stereotypes, archetypes, references, techniques –

Text on screen: *That which is repeated*: tropes, clichés, stereotypes, techniques...  
Clip: *IT'S THE 90S!* (Everything is Terrible!, 22 Sep. 2011) [29455771]

[Clip audio, various sources: “Wake up and smell the 90’s” / “For god’s sake, Chucky, drag yourself into the 90s” / “Uncle Phil, can you take a stroll into the 90’s, please?”]  
...from hackneyed lines to common actions or gestures, the presence of a given object, or even a formal technique like a match cut or the use of a snorricam. A big part of interest in the supercut springs from a common desire to pull back the curtain and reveal the culture industry’s endless loop of tired, intentional recycling.

Clips: *Mad Men’s Don Draper Says ‘What?’* (dondrapersayswhat, reupped 26 Dec. 2010) [WsJSRP7cZVo]  
*Thumbs up in the movies* (Onikorp, 20 Nov. 2017) [UR0D81\_SO5g]  
*People in Movies and TV Hitting Deer With Their Cars (Supercut)* (Wiseguy Pictures, 20 Jul. 2017) [y0JidKcgJNE]  
*Groundless* (Jen Proctor, ca. 2006) [8042979]  
*Next Stop, Analysis: The Contradictory Trains of Cinema* (What’s So Great About That [Grace Lee], 13 Dec. 2018) [oOBLESHpwbQ]  
*MATCH CUT: The Art of Cinematic Technique* (Celia Gómez, 23 Oct. 2016) [188527960]  
*The Dizzying Effect of the Snorricam* (Bill Rhehera for Fandor, 1 Jun. 2018) [\_l8hnVvF-vs]

Some of this repetition expresses a creator’s personality, like a director’s formal signatures – say, Wes Anderson’s use of symmetry, Spike Lee’s actor-and-camera dolly shots, or what Fandor calls the “Gilded Cages” in Sofia Coppola’s films.

Clips: *Wes Anderson // Centered* (kogonada, 17 Mar. 2014) [89302848]  
*Spike Lee - The Dolly Shot (Video Essay)* (Richard Cruz, 19 Apr. 2012) [40689260]  
*Sofia Coppola - Gilded Cages* (Joost Broeren & Sander Spies for Fandor, 18 May 2017) [pah2Em\_vnsk]

It could also be an actor’s tics and trademarks, like Woody Allen’s stammers, Jeff Goldblum’s verbal fillers, or Tom Cruise’s need to run.

Clips: *Every Woody Allen Stammer From Every Woody Allen Movie* (HuffPost, 25 Mar. 2013) [0E34d7NXqPQ]  
*Jeff Goldblum Making Noises (Supercut)* (Owenergy, 11 Apr. 2018) [gEJKQI\_ht1I]  
*Every Tom Cruise Run. Ever.* (Burger Fiction, 14 Oct. 2016) [U8Q2MgdMskQ]

It could also be a screenwriter or showrunner’s fondness for certain kinds of dialogue.  
[Clip audio, characters in *The Wire*: “The game is the game” / “Well, what’s done is done” / “The law is the law” / “The bet is the bet!”]

Clips: *Sorkinisms - A Supercut* (Kevin T. Porter, 25 Jun. 2012) [S78RzZr3lwl]  
*The Wire: Tautology Supercut* (Propolandante, 13 May 2015) [qoyq88niVEU]

Other conventions result in response to formal problems or constraints, like how to represent texting in film, or time travel, or how to censor expletives for network broadcast. Other tropes appear as harmless genre cliché, like the way that cars fail to start in horror films, or that classic, the “slow clap.”

Clips: *A Brief Look at Texting and the Internet in Film* (Every Frame a Painting [Tony Zhou], 15 Aug. 2014) [uFfq2zblGXw]

*Chronovision (Time travel tribute)* (Johanna Vaude, for Blow Up - ARTE, 31 May 2018) [272774969]  
*How To Curse On Network TV* (BuzzFeed Celeb, 24 Dec. 2013) [BPhnDfOmjel]  
*Landing onto Vehicles - Supercut* (supercutonline, 2 Jan. 2016) [koxGOiCvNGY]  
*Horror Movie Cars Never Start When You Need Them Most* (HuffPostMovieMashups, 13 Mar. 2014)  
[v6AiwTmD4Bo]  
*The Slow Clap* (YuppiePunk, 22 Jan. 2007) [QhTiJEYqqY8]

But a deeper level of the appeal of the supercut depends on the fact that since media objects also carry the residue of unacknowledged beliefs, patterns of representation often appear unintentionally. Slice a well-chosen cross-section through a culture's film and TV, and you might turn up something surprising. For instance, in *Cats Die Funny, Dogs Die Sad*, Jacob T. Swinney examines what in our mass social attitudes about pets predisposes certain deaths toward comedy and others toward tragedy. In the Hillary Clinton episode of Lindsay Ellis's series "Loose Canon," she explores how impersonations of Hillary since the mid-1990's have not simply skewed negative, but have moreover tended to ignore the specifics of her personality to use her simply as a container for whatever form of misogyny was most convenient at the time. Others examine how disturbingly normalized it's become for figures of law in crime dramas to taunt suspects with threats of prison rape, or the 90's and early 2000's phenomenon of inserting throwaway lesbian kisses to boost ratings, the pervasive misogyny that often goes unquestioned or even celebrated in nerd masculinity, or the long history of the "cool girl" trope and what it represents.

Clips: *Cats Die Funny, Dogs Die Sad* (Jacob T. Swinney for Fandor, 5 Aug. 2016) [HHqwVhi\_JIY]  
*Loose Canon: Hillary Clinton* (Lindsay Ellis, 25 Sep. 2016) [yMi8\_7UOnto]  
*Hollywood Justice: Prison Rape For All* (HuffPostMovieMashups, 16 Apr. 2014) [t\_NHDWI85DE]  
*Lesbian Kiss Episodes: 'Vulture's Secret History of Television' Episode 4* (New York Magazine, 22 Jul. 2015)  
[zub8tYIWcl]  
*The Adorkable Misogyny of The Big Bang Theory* (Pop Culture Detective [Jonathan McIntosh], 31 Aug. 2017) [X3-hOigoxHs]  
*The Cool Girl Trope, Explained* (The Take [Susannah McCullough, Debra Minoff], 12 Dec. 2019)  
[bEKNFX7LWRk]

My definition of the supercut may account for the variety of the form, but it does not explain how this form can serve such very different ends.

Text on screen: A briskly-cut  
video list of  
appropriated  
moving images  
sharing some specific matching characteristic  
and offered as a representative cross-section of that characteristic.

How is it that this method of collecting repeated elements from media can facilitate the apparently opposing goals of fannish celebration and critical analysis—of entertainment and education? Or put another way, what does it say about the nature of the human brain that the strong patterning of the supercut triggers a response that falls on a continuum between pleasure and learning?

Text on screen: [a horizontal line with arrows on both ends, representing a continuum with "DESIRE" written on the far left and "ANALYSIS" on the far right. Under "DESIRE" appear the words "Celebration" and "Pleasure." Under "ANALYSIS" appear the words "Criticism" and "Learning."]

Now, without reviewing literature that falls well outside the scope of this project, I'll begin by remarking that it's been interdisciplinarily well-established, over the past half-century and beyond, that humans in all cultures assiduously classify the creatures, objects, and events that they find around them, and that human intelligence is closely associated with the capacity for pattern recognition. Moreover, more recent research has indicated that recognizing patterns – in fact, even the anticipation of a pattern – triggers a dopamine pleasure-response in the brain associated with learning.

Images on screen: Cover and excerpt of *The Savage Mind* illustrating a classification scheme for a plant (Levi-Strauss, C 1966 *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 141)

Cover and illustrations from *How to Create a Mind* illustrating a brain's possible method for recognizing letters and reading words (Kurzweil, R 2013 *How to create a mind: The secret of human thought revealed*. New York: Penguin. pp. 42-45)

Title and abstract for the paper "Superior pattern processing is the essence of the evolved human brain" (Mattson, M P 2014 Superior pattern processing is the essence of the evolved human brain. *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, 2014(8): 265. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.3389/fnins.2014.00265>)

Title and abstract for the paper "Ever-Changing Cycles of Musical Pleasure: The Role of Dopamine and Anticipation" (Gebauer, L; Kringelbach, M L; and Vuust, P 2012 Ever-Changing Cycles of Musical Pleasure: The Role of Dopamine and Anticipation. *Psychomusicology: Music, Mind, and Brain*, 22(2): 152-167. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031126>)

Structuralists argue that when it comes to language, we understand the meanings of words by situating them into patterns with other words. These might be simple oppositional patterns, like hot vs. cold, high vs. low, best vs. worst, but they can also be more complex.

Text on screen: ["hot," "high," "best" in a column on the left; "cold," "low," "worst" in a column on the right.]

In general, structuralists are concerned with two broad categories of patterns, or structures, in language: syntagmatic structures and paradigmatic structures, and they generally depict these structures as intersecting on perpendicular axes.

Text on screen: ["Syntagmatic Structures" and "Paradigmatic Structures" appear above and below the words already on screen; "Syntagmatic Structures" floats to the bottom of the screen to label a horizontal axis and "Paradigmatic Structures" turns sideways and floats to the right of the screen to label a vertical axis.]

Syntagmatic structures, or syntagmas, are sequential structures – that is, the order or sequence into which words must be put to create meaning, like phrases or sentences.

Text on screen: [Below "Syntagmatic Structures," the supplemental label "(sequential; as in the order of words in a sentence)" appears]

[Then, as the words "hot," "high," "cold," and "low" fade out, new words fade in around "best" and "worst" to create the sentence "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..."]

Paradigmatic structures, or paradigms, are associative structures – that is, the various mental chains of related words that our brains associate with any given words.

Text on screen: [Below "Paradigmatic Structures," the supplemental label "(associative; eg. a list of synonyms)" appears]

These paradigmatic structures include synonyms, conceptual continua, words formed from the same root, or even words that sound alike.

Text on screen: [above the first instance of the word “times,” the list “eras, years, days, moments” appears. Beneath the second instance of the word “times,” the list “timer, timing, timely, timeless” appears.]

Not only do individual words belong to these structuring categories, but so do whole sentences or paragraphs—even entire stories, which structuralists argue derive from *myths*, which is to say, ingrained ideas a society has about itself that express themselves in genres, tropes, and storytelling formulas.

Text on screen: [above and below “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...”, other famous opening phrases that similarly invoke time appear: “Once upon a time...”, “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...”, “Some years ago – never mind how long precisely...”, and “It was a dark and stormy night...”]

The supercut, by revealing that pattern of recycling and rearticulation, offers crucial hints as to how myths circulate. When structuralists say that all meaning is contextual, they’re referring to this dense web of paradigmatic association, quotation, ideology, and myth.

Image on screen: Joseph Kosuth, *Jorge Luis Borges (Book of Sand)*, 1995, lithograph appears, itself bearing the text, from Borges’s *The Book of Sand*: “‘Is that a quotation?’ I asked. ‘Of course. Quotations are all we have now. Language is a system of quotations.’”]

But they also mean that the incidental meaning of any word results from the pattern of words into which it’s presently situated. Sometimes this is an easy continuum, like when I put the word “green” next to names of other colors.

Text on screen: Green, Orange, Yellow, Blue, Purple

Sometimes it involves a complex interplay of metaphor, as in these slang words for “money.”

Text on screen: Green, Dough, Moolah, Cheddar, Scratch

In each case, the overarching pattern imposes a meaning on each individual word. That is to say, the meaning of each individual word derives from the pattern.

Text on screen: Green, Naive, New, Immature, Gullible  
Green, Tee, Bunker, Fairway, Rough  
Green, Reform, Libertarian, Constitution, Socialist  
Green, Gaye, Sledge, Redding, Franklin  
Green, Screen, Scene, Mean, Tohline

A consequence of this is that when the pattern selects a meaning for the set, it also de-selects all other possible meanings. Thus, if all meaning is contextual, contextualization often arrives at meaning subtractively.

Text on screen: All meaning is contextual,  
but contextualization tends to arrive at meaning subtractively.

In the case of cinema, a shot often encompasses far more meaning-making elements than an individual word ever could. Thus, while any given shot bears the potential for nearly limitless meaning, the moment that a shot is placed in the context of other shots, the resultant pattern has the effect of drastically suppressing or even erasing much of that potential meaning.

Clip: *Visual Disturbances* (Eric Faden, 21 Nov. 2018) [302106011]

Text on screen: \*for a much better discussion of this, please see this essay

As an example, here's the Lumière Brothers' first film, *Workers Leaving the Factory*, thought for a long time by some to be a document of everyday life. But if we put it alongside the other two takes that the Lumières shot, we plainly see that it was staged. No doubt, this contextualization adds meaning, but it does so by directing our attention toward evidence of artifice and thus away from other things.

Clips: all three versions of *La sortie des usines Lumière* (Auguste and Louis Lumière, 1895)

If we instead put *Workers Leaving the Factory* alongside other Lumière films, we might investigate the way they staged movement in depth. This contextualization primes us to view the image purely geometrically rather than historically.

Clips: various Lumière street views of Lyon, France (1895-97) from Kino's 1999 DVD *The Lumière Brothers' First Films* (1895-1897)

Surrounded by images of crowds from film history, we see the crowd.

Images: Screenshots from the films *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927), *Forbidden Games* (Rene Clement, 1952), *The Cranes are Flying* (Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957), *Intolerance* (D. W. Griffith, 1916), and *The Crowd* (King Vidor, 1928)

Surrounded by images of bicycles from film history, we focus on the bicycle.

Images: Screenshots from the films *Our Little Sister* (Hirokazu Kore-eda, 2015), *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio de Sica, 1948), *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1969), and *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, et al, 1939)

Harun Farocki situated the Lumière film alongside eleven other depictions of workers leaving factories from a century of film history, reflecting on the historical reality that workers are rarely depicted actually working in film.

Images: installation views of Harun Farocki, *Workers Leaving the Factory in 11 Decades*, 2006, video installation, 42min 26sec, dimensions variable

So, we've established that paradigmatic contextualization is subtractive. But so is narrativity. The activity of following a story instrumentalizes the spectator's attention, orienting it toward objects and actions that drive the plot and away from details extraneous to this purpose. Furthermore, every shot in a film virtually represents the de-selection of all other shots the filmmakers could've put in its place.

Text on screen: [the axes labeled "Syntagmatic Structures" (horizontal) and "Paradigmatic Structures" (vertical) fade in again.]

Clip: in the lower half of the screen, a portion of the crop duster scene from *North by Northwest* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959) glides along the syntagmatic (horizontal) axis, leaving stills of five consecutive shots in its wake. These shots depict Cary Grant's character Roger Thornhill standing in the middle of a desolate country road, an airplane in the distance circling around, Grant running toward the camera as the plane swoops in behind him, Grant on his chest on the ground, and a field of mature stalks of corn a short distance away.

In film, we can't populate this region of the paradigmatic axis with shots that were never shot, but we can at least scour the archive for similar shots from other filmmakers. The function of paradigmatic analysis is at least in part to represent alternatives and restore possibilities.

Images: above each screenshot from *North by Northwest*, five shots of similar images from other films appear (eg., of characters standing alone on a rural road, of airplanes, of grain fields), comprising screenshots from:

*The Muppet Movie* (James Frawley, 1979)  
*Leave No Trace* (Debra Granik, 2018)  
*It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (Stanley Kramer, 1963)  
*Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955)  
*My Own Private Idaho* (Gus van Sant, 1991)  
*Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, 2017)  
*Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (Hayao Miyazaki, 1984)  
*The Right Stuff* (Philip Kaufman, 1983)  
*20<sup>th</sup> Century Women* (Mike Mills, 2016)  
*Days of Heaven* (Terence Malick, 1978)  
*Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994)  
*Breathless* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1959)  
*Touki Bouki* (Djibril Diop Mambety, 1973)  
*Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981)  
*Sherlock, Jr.* (Buster Keaton, 1924)  
*Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955)  
*I, Tonya* (Craig Gillespie, 2017)  
*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962)  
*The Robe* (Henry Koster, 1953)  
*Inside Llewyn Davis* (Ethan and Joel Coen, 2013)  
*Hara-kiri* (Masaki Kobayashi, 1962)  
*Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog, 2005)  
*At Any Price* (Ramin Bahrani, 2012)  
*Gabbeh* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1996)  
*Field of Dreams* (Phil Alden Robinson, 1989)

This is what Guy Maddin's feature film *The Green Fog* (2017) does by reconstructing Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) from other films shot in San Francisco. And it's what John D'Amico's *Star Wars: The Premake* (2015) attempted in reverse – by substituting every image from *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977) with films made before that movie's release.

Clips: *The Green Fog* (Guy Maddin, Evan Johnson & Galen Johnson, 2017)  
*Star Wars: The Premake* (John D'Amico, 18 Dec. 2015) [149371775]

Given this similarity between the paradigmatic axis and the supercut, it seems that film semioticians ought to have anticipated the supercut decades before it became popular. And indeed they did—kind of. Owen Gallagher (2012) points out that Christian Metz had already, at least partially, imagined the possibility of the supercut in *Film Language*.

Text on screen: "One of Metz's categories in particular, the 'parallel syntagm' or 'montage of motifs' has resurfaced in an unusual way in relatively recent remix history, in the form of the now ubiquitous 'supercut.'"

Gallagher, Owen. "Remix Semiosis as Ideology Critique: A Visual Semiotic Study of Critical Remix Video." *Gamma: Journal of Theory and Criticism* 20 (2012): 127-144, p. 133.

Image: the cover of Christian Metz's *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (Metz, C 1974 *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

Now, to be clear, Metz dealt with the possibility of a montage of repetitive images under several names, including the "frequentative syntagma" and the "bracket syntagma."

Text on screen: "frequentative syntagma," "bracket syntagma"

If you're interested in the details of this, here's a discussion of them—feel free to pause and read if you'd like—

Text on screen: As early as 1966 in the first version of his *Grande Syntagmatique*, Christian Metz identified a style of editing that he called the "frequentative syntagma," which he characterized as a "quick succession of repetitive images." He observes that in such a montage of repetitive images, the forward thrust of time (at least in a narrative sense) may weaken or even disappear. And in its purest form, which he called the "full frequentative," the images give a sense of synchrony, simultaneity, or even of being outside of time. (Metz, Christian. "La grande syntagmatique du film narratif." *Communications* vol. 8 no. 1, 1966 [120-124], pp. 121-22.) For an example, he suggested a series of close-ups of soldiers' feet marching to impart the sense of the full picture of war, which a camera could not encompass otherwise. Just as the frequentative syntagma employs repetition to suggest vastness, so also a supercut's repetition of a trope often implies the presence of many further examples elsewhere in the archive. (cont.)

In his later revised formulation in *Film Language*, Metz removed the frequentative syntagma and reclassified it as a modality within what he called the "bracket syntagma." Metz defined the bracket syntagma as a series of brief scenes meant to represent "typical samples of a same order of reality," arranged by the editing so as to "emphasize their presumed kinship within a category of facts" (Metz, Christian. *Film Language: a Semiotics of the Cinema*. Trans. Michael Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991 [1974], p. 126). Even though the "full frequentative" seemed to allow for a brief suspension of the vector of narrative time, Metz's formulation of the bracket syntagma is also clearly meant to serve narrative means (eg., to give an impression of the norms of the film's diegesis). By contrast, the supercut most often serves no narrative goal, but instead metanarratively lists or categorizes storytelling tropes. As such, the supercut might slightly resemble the structure of the bracket syntagma, but is by no means the same thing. (cont.)

John Bateman, in his more flexible and expansive revision of Metz (and other film semioticians), might classify the supercut as a "unitracking paratactic" structure (Bateman, John A. "Towards a grande paradigmaticque of film: Christian Metz reloaded." *Semiotica* 2007.167 (2007): pp. 13-64, p. 44). This is to say, a sequence in which the shots are linked by similarity (as opposed to a multitracking mode, where the shots are designed to contrast each other), and in which the shots play an equal role or are independent of one another (as opposed to a hypotactic structure, in which certain shots derive their meaning from how they are specifically positioned next to other shots). A supercut may be said to be paratactic because the shots could be arranged in many different orders and the same essential message – that is, that they are all examples of some category of thing – would be maintained. To be sure, Bateman's proposed *Grande Paradigmatique* comes much closer to accommodating the structure of the supercut, but I find his terminology unwieldy for my present purpose.

...But for the purposes of this project I'll offer two remarks. First, that Metz only dealt with this style of montage when it served a *narrative* purpose, and the supercut, like the paradigmatic axis, is *not* a narrative structure. However, second, because he was able to identify a case in which a paradigmatic set of images could *function* syntagmatically, I argue that it's reasonable to conclude that perceptually, we

do not favor one axis over the other. That is to say, our minds are probably comparably well-tuned to finding, tracking, and immersing ourselves in both syntagmatic patterns and paradigmatic patterns.

Text on screen: 1. The supercut is not a narrative structure  
2. Our minds are probably comparably skilled at finding and tracking both syntagmatic patterns and paradigmatic patterns

To test this hypothesis, I turn to Miklos Kiss's work on what he calls the "narrative supercut," in particular György Pálfi's 2012 feature-length supercut *Final Cut: Ladies and Gentlemen*. In *Final Cut: Ladies and Gentlemen*, Pálfi pulls clips from hundreds of films to reconstruct a kind archetypal boy-meets-girl, loses-girl, gets-her-back romance narrative.

Image: screenshot of title and opening paragraph of Kiss, Miklós. "Creativity Beyond Originality: György Pálfi's *Final Cut* as Narrative Supercut." *Senses of Cinema* 67 (July 2013)  
Clip: *Final Cut: Ladies and Gentlemen* (György Pálfi, 2012)

Working with *Final Cut: Ladies and Gentlemen* as a *de facto* work of film-philosophy, Miklos Kiss advances two key claims regarding the nature of spectatorial attention. First, that spectators need far fewer cues in a film's mise-en-scène and editing to follow a narrative than previous scholarship has supposed.

Text on screen: 1. Spectators need far fewer cues in a film's mise-en-scene and editing to follow a narrative than previous scholarship has supposed.

In *Final Cut: Ladies and Gentlemen*, the actors, costumes, and setting change every time there's a cut, and sometimes screen direction isn't even preserved, and yet viewers can easily follow the story. Using Tim J. Smith's "Attentional Theory of Cinematic Continuity" as a framework, Kiss argues that narrative engagement comes down *not* to an interest in the visual surface of the actors, mise-en-scène, or cinematography, but rather to a desire to track action and motivation, both of which can be significantly abstracted without the audience having any trouble. He writes, "Even if viewers recognize the discontinuity between the juxtaposed shots, they won't be troubled by its spatio-temporal disturbance, as their attention and expectation are occupied by an unfolding action-continuity within a narrative arc."

Text on screen: Tim J. Smith's  
"Attentional Theory of Cinematic Continuity"  
Action and Motivation  
"Even if viewers recognize the discontinuity between the juxtaposed shots, they won't be troubled by its spatio-temporal disturbance, as their attention and expectation are occupied by an unfolding action-continuity within a narrative arc."  
Kiss, Miklós. "Creativity Beyond Originality: György Pálfi's *Final Cut* as Narrative Supercut." *Senses of Cinema* 67 (July 2013)

*Final Cut* proves, along with crowdsourced rotoscoping projects and fan reshoots of famous films, that in general we possess keen skills for zeroing in on the essence of a narrative and ignoring extraneity.

Clip: *Johnny Cash - Ain't No Grave [Official HD] - The Johnny Cash Project* (xChrisMilk, 30 Sep. 2010)  
[WwNVInt9iDK]

Secondly, if spectatorial immersion depends on tracking patterns of action and motivation, there's no reason why the brain should prefer action and motivation within a narrative.

Clip: *Final Cut: Ladies and Gentlemen* (György Pálfi, 2012)

Text on screen: 2. If spectatorial immersion depends on tracking patterns of action and motivation, there is no reason why the brain should prefer action and motivation within a narrative.

Kiss writes that once viewers of *Final Cut: Ladies and Gentlemen* grasp the film's unorthodox system of narrativity, they *not only* have mental space left over to indulge in database-thinking; he argues that many viewers relegate the task of tracking the narrative beneath those "database-pleasures." He writes, "The film's cliché-based narrative triggers hypotheses that focus more on catalogue-related instead of story-driven predictions or expectations."

Text on screen: "The film's cliché-based narrative triggers hypotheses that focus more on catalogue-related instead of story-driven predictions or expectations."

*Creativity Beyond Originality: György Pálfi's FINAL CUT as Narrative Supercut* (Miklos Kiss, 12 Aug. 2015) [136142834], min. 33

What he means here is that viewers spend less time tracking the story and more time trying to guess which movies Pálfi will quote from next. Now, if we accept this account, then one of the primary modes of supercut-consumption must involve the viewer mimicking the filmmaker's research process in their own head; that is, trying to think of additional clips that could have been included. This may be such a strong imperative that Kiss argues that many viewers *prefer it* to narrativity.

So to summarize: Human capacity for pattern recognition is strong and it's linked to both pleasure and learning. In general, what's true for syntagmatic patterns is true for the paradigmatic patterns. A sufficiently robust pattern commands viewer attention subtractively, whether it's a robust *narrative* pattern of *action and motivation* or a robust paradigmatic pattern of matching properties. When images are situated in such a pattern, viewers tend to attentionally subordinate any other *content* or *contexts* that do not immediately relate to the pattern.

Clip: *Final Cut: Ladies and Gentlemen* (György Pálfi, 2012) continues to play, and the non-diegetic rock soundtrack fades up momentarily

Put another way, the supercut inherently tends to foster uncritical desire for matching images.

Text on screen: The supercut inherently tends to foster uncritical desire for matching images

Thus, in cases where a viewer already desires the *content* of the images – perhaps they are a fan of the source material or trope – the mere form of the supercut *naturally intensifies this desire*. And that's not simply because it amasses an abundance of desirable images, but because supercut editing stokes desire for repetition, pattern, and linkage *in and of themselves*, regardless of content.

And therein lies the aesthetic problem of the supercut. The form naturally leans toward fandom and cathexis.

Text on screen: [the desire/analysis continuum re-appears, and rotates around its midpoint to lean toward the desire end]

In fact, it does so even to the extent that manifestly unpleasurable, undesirable, negative images – for instance, of people being seriously hurt—can be made to seem “good,” at least in the sense of well-ordered, simply through the strong patterning of quick matches on action and synchronization to music.

Clips: *Fails - Hard knock Life* (BAESTI LP, 16 May 2016) [wivZkNNXm7Y]

*It's The Hard Knock Life (Fail Compilation)* (Claudia Castonguay, 28 May 2017) [BWxPAz5DOZo]

This is something that video essayist Kevin B. Lee noticed years ago.

Clip: 269. *What Makes a Video Essay Great?* (Kevin B. Lee, 28 Dec. 2014) [199577445]

[Clip audio, Kevin B. Lee: “Earlier this year, video essayist Nelson Carvajal made a compilation of women in Martin Scorsese movies. It was intended as a tribute to Scorsese and was widely circulated as such.”  
Clip audio, *Casino* (Martin Scorsese, 1995), Sharon Stone: “I am not—” / Robert De Niro: “You’re gonna be sorry if you don’t stop this—” / Sharon Stone: “Don’t you threaten me! *Don’t you threaten me!*”  
Clip audio, Kevin B. Lee: “But in the comments section, I noticed one woman who linked to her own video compilation of women in Scorsese films. And when I watched it, it was something of a revelation. The clips were almost identical to Carvajal’s video, but contextualized in a totally different way. It was like watching Scorsese’s films through a completely new set of eyes, where the depiction of women registered as a kind of ritualized misogyny, hidden in plain sight.”]

For me, the crucial aesthetic question of the supercut concerns how a form predisposed toward uncritical image-consumption can be bent to support fruitful analysis. That is to say, under what aesthetic conditions does a supercut promote cathexis, and under what different conditions can it stimulate meaningful insight?

Text on screen: The supercut inherently tends to foster uncritical desire for matching images

[The desire/analysis continuum appears again, still leaning toward desire, then slowly pivoting to lean toward analysis]

The supercut is, after all, at its heart, an ordering principle. It collects matching things and it lines them up. Consider this series from Jeff Brouws called *Signs without Signification*. It operates on a similar principle. See, arranged like this, the images seem to belong together. As in the case of a theme and variations in music, a big part of the perceptual pleasure here involves enjoying the differences only inasmuch as they do not overwhelm the general pattern.

Image: Jeff Brouws, *Signs without Signification*, 2003-2007, 24 archival pigment prints, 7x7 in each

But placed into this chain of belonging-ness, the real referent of each image is muted. In isolation, each one of these photographs would not signify membership within a set, but something else entirely: an eyesore, capitalist waste, a metonymy of the death of the American Dream. Were the composition wider, the additional context would *specify* the crisis and possibly activate critical attention to it. But cropping obliterates the context.

Image: the view narrows to a single print from the series, then a large white rectangle expands around it, revealing the text “Insert image of rest of town here”

Eli Horwatt writes that the same applies to use of *archival* images. When artists taxonomize images from mass culture, they have the potential to interrogate and reveal what Foucault called “systems of

discursivity.” As an example of this, Horwatt offers Annette Messager’s 1972 piece *The Voluntary Tortures*. *The Voluntary Tortures* catalogues a range of cumbersome devices and painful procedures once sold to women as beauty regimens. The critical stance of this project is evident not solely in the title, but also because the images are just visually dissimilar enough that the spectator must figure out what they have in common, and therefore contemplate their content.

Text on screen: “systems of discursivity”

Image: Annette Messager, *Voluntary Tortures*, 1972, 86 gelatin silver prints, dimensions variable

But not all works scouring the archive productively interpret it or activate viewer attention in this way. So for contrast, Horwatt offers this work by Christian Marclay. He writes, “Marclay bluntly empties his materials and their status as circulated images, instead emphasizing their iconographic similarity. ... Anything approaching a politics of representation has been erased through contextual conformity.”

Image: Christian Marclay, *Chorus II*, 1988, 29 framed photographs, 56 × 74 in overall

Text on screen: “Marclay bluntly empties his materials and their status as circulated images, instead emphasizing their iconographic similarity. ... Anything approaching a politics of representation has been erased through contextual conformity.”

Horwatt, Eli. “On *The Clock* and Christian Marclay’s Instrumental Logic of Appropriation.” *Framework* vol. 54, no. 2, Fall 2013, pp. 208–225, p. 212)

By cropping out everything but the mouths, Marclay has done what Horwatt calls “instrumental” appropriation. All images carry historical content and specificity, but Horwatt points out that when images are cropped or cut enough, only the ahistorical surface of the image remains legible. Thus this “down-to-the-bone” cutting of an image, “tends towards the evisceration of those pieces of contextual information that ... produce difference, historical reference, [and] political contexts...”

Text on screen: “tends towards the evisceration of those pieces of contextual information that ... produce difference, historical reference, [and] political contexts...” (Horwatt 221)

Applying this notion of cropping back to cinema, we might observe that spectatorial immersion in either a syntagmatic chain or a paradigmatic chain depends in part on the steady flow of the pattern running through them.

Image: [the axes labeled “Syntagmatic Structures” (which is horizontal) and “Paradigmatic Structures” re-appear on screen. A series of empty rectangles representing images in a syntagmatic chain appear just above the horizontal axis, followed by another series of rectangles representing images in a paradigmatic chain arranged along the vertical axis.]

But if *extra* images were pulled into a paradigmatic chain, the potential for spectacle-flow could be interrupted.

Image: [an extra empty rectangle appears to the left and right of each of the rectangles in the vertical (paradigmatic) chain]

For instance, let’s say I want to create a supercut of characters stepping into the street and getting hit by a vehicle, a fairly tired trope in American cinema. I could cut these images “down to the bone,” such that little besides the moment of collision is preserved.

Image: [the extra rectangles just added to the left and right disappear]

Clips: [fast-cut clips of characters getting hit by vehicles; an interpolation of *Hit By A Bus - The Supercut* (hh1edits [Harry Hanrahan], 5 Feb. 2013) [tmYrWXhFf4c]]

By stripping off the context, I truncate them into spectacle. The images, in a sense, flow in just one direction, on a single vector. The result comes off as kinetic and celebratory, a meaningless collage of action.

Image: [one screenshot from each clip appears, one at a time, in the rectangles arranged vertically, along the Paradigmatic axis]

But when Harry Hanrahan made *his Hit-By-A-Bus* supercut back in 2013, he left some of the narrative intact. Look at how this functions differently.

Clip: *Hit By A Bus - The Supercut* (hh1edits [Harry Hanrahan], 5 Feb. 2013) [tmYrWXhFf4c]

Image: [each shot from the opening clip used in Hanrahan's *Hit By A Bus* appears in the empty rectangles arranged horizontally along the Syntagmatic axis.]

[Clip audio, Greg Kinnear in *Ghost Town* (David Koepp, 2008) [speaking into a cell phone after dodging a falling air conditioner]: "Oh, ho ho! Wow! You are not going to believe what almost just happened to m—"]

Image: [The extra rectangles to the left and right of the rectangles arranged along the Paradigmatic axis reappear, and fill one at a time with three images apiece from the next clips in Hanrahan's supercut]

[Clip audio, various: "You know what? I'm going to deliver this baby to you on a silver platter, one hundred percent—" / "I'm moving on, Carter. And if you want to waste your life beating the shit out of Alex every time you see him, then you can just drop fucking dead."]

In this version, the act of watching almost becomes Sisyphean. And that's not simply because a tired trope *repeats*; it's because Hanrahan has included just enough of the diegesis that each time he cuts to a new clip, it feels like a frustrating disjunction rather than a smooth link. Every time a clip ends, the supercut jarringly alternates between the overarching "vertical" paradigmatic structure and the smaller "horizontal" mini-syntagmas that compose it.

Image: [vertical and horizontal arrows appear to trace paradigmatic and syntagmatic chains]

By embedding one pattern within another and not allowing either to dominate, such that the clips are recontextualized without being fully decontextualized, Hanrahan forces us to look *both* beyond the narratives *and* beyond the spectacle. We do not merely witness the spectacle of bus hits over and over; we witness the step-back-into-the-street-and-get-hit-by-a-bus cliché over and over.

Text on screen: \* by the way, this supercut is over 12 minutes long

The extra narrative padding points toward a context: all the rooms where Hollywood writers, producers, and directors once sat, face to face with this embarrassing cliché on a page, and maddeningly chose to use it anyway. Instead of exulting in a flurry of spectacle, we feel stuck in the rut of trope.

Clip: *The View: A 'Back-to-the-Camera Shot' Montage* (Zach Prewitt, 9 Apr. 2013) [lqLfk1sZDo]

Text on screen: To summarize

[the desire/analysis continuum re-appears, level]

To summarize, the smooth consumption of images depends upon their subsumption within a system of linkage, such that viewers primarily perceive NOT the individual image, but rather the pattern to which it belongs. Whether images are trivial, ugly, or cliché, once well-patterned, they inherit a patina of rightness from that system of order around them.

Text on screen: [beneath the heading “desire”] ‘down-to-the-bone’ cutting, ‘instrumental’ appropriation, superficial linkage, ‘rightness’ regardless of content

However, when the supercut is structured such that the paradigmatic flow is interrupted – by bits of narrativity, by contextualizing voice-over or text, or by other methods – productive analysis can cohere.

Text on screen: [beneath the heading “analysis”] recontextualization without decontextualization, critical revelation of ‘systems of discursivity’

So, to close Part 1: one of my favorite examples of a supercut drawing attention to a pattern while at the same time denying the viewer the pleasures of matching.

Clip: *Concussion Protocol* (Josh Begley for Field of Vision, 1 Feb. 2018) [253738508]

This is Josh Begley’s *Concussion Protocol*, a compilation of every concussion suffered by a player in the NFL’s 2017-2018 season. By playing these videos in reverse, he thwarts the normal structures of expectation and payoff associated with physics and time’s arrow. That is to say, we can’t quite anticipate where the traumatic brain injury will occur or root for it, like we might root for the onrush of violence in a down-to-the-bone supercut of fails, like the one we watched earlier. Instead, having already seen these players injured, if we “root” for anything, it’s for the symbolic undoing of that injury, as conceptualized by the reverse motion. Videos like these are useful when studying the *aesthetics* of the supercut, because rare or unusual explorations of the form help the scholar to get a sense of limits and potentials. But *history* is another matter. Where did this idea come from? What is the history of the supercut?

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## **PART 2. Histories**

In Part 1, I argued that the form of the supercut naturally inclines toward stoking an uncritical desire for matching images. Given this tendency, where should we expect to discover the *roots* of the supercut? In the avant-garde? In documentary? Or in more populist forms of entertainment?

Text on screen: [the desire/analysis continuum reappears, first leaning toward desire, then returning to level as images appear]

Images: Editor Elizaveta Svilova with shelves of film reels; screenshot from *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929)

Production still of Buster Keaton on the set of *Sherlock, Jr.* (Keaton, 1924); a deleted scene where Buster looks at a shelf of film reels while holding scissors (hosted at Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences 2012, Inside the Booth – A Journey Through Projection, available at: <https://www.oscars.org/videos-photos/inside-booth-journey-through-projection> [accessed on 22 December 2020].)

To be fair, this might be a trick question, because the more I look into the supercut, the more historical tributaries I discover, and they come from practically anywhere artists tinkered with editing, across modes, places, and eras. But if you ask most of the existing histories of the supercut, they'll tell you some combination of the same short list of names over and over: Christian Marclay, Dara Birnbaum, Kandy Fong, Carl Reiner, Bruce Conner, and Joseph Cornell.

Text on screen: [the names Birnbaum, Marclay, Fong, Reiner, Conner, and Cornell each appear atop a clip of one of the filmmaker's works]

Clips: *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (Dara Birnbaum, 1978)

*Telephones* (Christian Marclay, 1995)

*What do you do with a drunken Vulcan?* (Kandy Fong, 2012 re-creation of 1975 slideshow)

*Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (Carl Reiner, 1982)

*A Movie* (Bruce Conner, 1958)

*Rose Hobart* (Joseph Cornell, 1936)

But all of these proposed origin points are at best quite incomplete and at worst fairly misguided, and they leave out so many other important waypoints, from already-canonical names like Sergei Eisenstein and Walter Ruttmann, to more obscure names like Oskar Kalbus and Jayne Loader, to surprising names like Agnès Varda and the Marx Brothers.

Text on screen: [the names Eisenstein, Ruttmann, Kalbus, Loader, Varda, and Marx Brothers each replace one of the first list of names, with an accompanying clip]

Clips: *October: Ten Days that Shook the World* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1927)

*Melody of the World* (Walter Ruttmann, 1929)

*Rund um die Liebe* (Oskar Kalbus, 1929)

*The Atomic Café* (Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty, Pierce Rafferty, 1982)

*You Have Beautiful Stairs, You Know* (Agnès Varda, 1986)

*Duck Soup* (Leo McCarey, 1933)

In this section, my goal is to offer an account of the many lines of development or "cultural series" of the supercut, and how they spring from a slew of impulses to organize visual history into patterns, most of these traceable back to the 1920s and even beyond. But in order to do that, I'll have to first poke holes in some of the leading origin-narratives of the supercut, demonstrating where they go off-track or fall short.

Text on screen: Part 2: Histories [table of contents]

29:30 Introduction

30:58 It's not avant-garde (and other errors), or:

31:08 Why Dara Birnbaum didn't invent the supercut

33:41 And neither did the fanvid

39:06 And neither did *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid*

42:40 And neither did Bruce Conner

46:17 The supercut at the convergence of various cultural series

47:45 Cinephilia before Marclay:

48:38 Varda, Workman, and Tornatore

52:22 Back to the 20's

53:07 Ruttmann's *Melody*: The Cross-Section Film

54:36 Superficial matching thereafter

55:18 Deeper connections: Vertov, Eisenstein, & Shub

59:21 Visual Culture: Gathering evidence of representation

1:02:55 A side trip through kinestasis

1:04:07 "Supercuts" in other forms of art  
1:06:03 Gance's *Napoleon*, stillness, and image-grids  
1:06:32 Stylistic cross-pollination and the city symphony  
1:09:45 What proto-supercuts leave out  
1:10:40 How to 'supercut' your own footage  
1:11:15 Vorkapich montages  
1:12:32 Serial narrative ellipsis vs. diegetic essayism  
1:15:39 Outtakes, casting, and OuLiPo  
1:17:35 Further back: The canon and the concordance

So let's begin. Tom McCormack, in his influential 2011 history of the supercut, and Stephanie Rebick both point to Dara Birnbaum's single-channel video *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman (1978)* as one of the pivotal waypoints in the genealogy of the supercut.

Images: Pages 146 and 147 of Rebick, S 2016 *The Invention of the Supercut*. In: Augaitis, D et al *MashUp: The Birth of Modern Culture*. Vancouver: Black Dog Publishing Limited, pp. 146-151.

Title and one paragraph of McCormack, T 2011 *Compilation Nation: The History and the Rise of the Supercut*, 25 April, 2011. Available at <http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/compilation-nation-20110425> [Last accessed 4 December, 2020.]

Rebick argues that Birnbaum used "strategies of fragmentation, repetition and mimicry that would become mainstays of the supercut."

Text on screen: "...strategies of fragmentation, repetition and mimicry that would become mainstays of the supercut..."

Rebick, Stephanie. "The Invention of the Supercut." *MashUp: The Birth of Modern Culture*, edited by Daina Augaitis, Bruce Grenville, and Stephanie Rebick, Black Dog Publishing Limited, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2016, p. 146.

While Birnbaum no doubt deserves a canonical place in the history of remix, I'd argue that the editing strategies here are not on a continuum with those of the supercut.

Clip: *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman (Dara Birnbaum, 1978)*

Text on screen: Recall our definition of the supercut from part 1:

A briskly-cut  
video list of  
appropriated  
moving images  
sharing some specific matching characteristic  
and offered as a representative cross-section of that characteristic.

In particular, a supercut doesn't simply fragment; it matches and collects; its editing is not just a matter of *severing* footage from a narrative structure, as Birnbaum does, but of re-situating clips into a paradigmatic group, which Birnbaum does not. Furthermore, these bullet deflections and spinning transformations do not offer a representative cross-section of these tropes. And finally, while a supercut definitely repeats tropes, it usually does not repeat, or loop, unique bits of footage.

Text on screen: matching vs. fragmentation  
grouping vs. severing  
listing tropes vs. looping footage

In formalist terms, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* seems to have more in common with the Dadaist editing in Leger's *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), Joseph Cornell's idiosyncratic film collage work, or even novelty newsreels like Charles Ridley's *Schichlegruber Doing the Lambeth Walk* (1941), which used optical printing to burlesque *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1934).

Clips: *Ballet Mécanique* (Fernand Léger, 1924)  
*By Night with Torch and Spear* (Joseph Cornell, 1940s)  
*Schichlegruber Doing the Lambeth Walk* (Charles A. Ridley, 1941)

More proximately, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* resembles the looping/stuttering structuralist experiments of Ken Jacobs or Owen Land.

Clips: *Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc.* (Owen Land, 1966)  
*Tom Tom, The Piper's Son* (Ken Jacobs, 1969)  
*Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer* (Jack Goldstein, 1975)

This places it on a line of development with more recent deconstructive experiments in celluloid decasia, datamoshing, Scratch Video, Youtube poop, or video glitch more generally.

Clips: *Epileptic Seizure Comparison* (Paul Sharits, 1976)  
*Lake Placid '80* (Nam June Paik, 1980)  
*Night of 1000 Eyes* (Suzanne Goldbacher and Kim Flitcroft, 1984)  
*The Kiss* (Raphael Montañez Ortiz, 1985)  
*A Song from the Cultural Revolution* (Les LeVeque, 1998)  
*Ronald McDonald insanity* (mrhorseshoe, 2 Jan. 2008) [Q16KpquGslc] [originally posted as: *M. C. Donarudo wa dansu ni muchuna no ka? Saishu kichiku dokeshi Donarudo M* (Mikuru, 1 Jan. 2008) [<http://www.nicovideo.jp/watch/sm1919148>]]  
*Long Live the New Flesh* (Nicolas Provost, 2009)  
*Youtube Poop - Aladdin commits suicide* (AlvinYTP, ca. Aug. 2010) [orig. NWDeOqifLlk]

Others situate *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* on the genealogy of the fanvid...

Text on screen: fanvid (aka fan video, fan remix, viding, etc)

...likely because of the pop-culture provenance of the object it remixes and its close analysis of gesture. But if Birnbaum's statements on the piece hold any interpretive weight...

Clip: *Dara Birnbaum: the dark matter of media light* (artvideotv, 2009) [wQQ-ss2rzuU]

[Clip audio, Dara Birnbaum: "I wanted to stop television images that were predominantly images of women [and] try to show to an audience re-edited-type footage that starts them questioning what the television image is about."]

...she meant to do the opposite of what vidding does, which seeks the intensification of desire, rather than *détournement* of mass entertainment.

Now, this is not to say that fanvids aren't part of the history of the supercut. Others have claimed that they are, and they're right.

Images: header and paragraph on vidding from Miller, B [he4ts3eker] 2016 We Love Video: The Evolution of the Supercut, 18 July 2016. Available at <https://brenkjm.wordpress.com/2016/07/18/the-evolution-of-the-supercut/> [Last accessed 22 July 2019].

Paragraphs on vidding from Murray, B 2015 Remixing Culture And Why The Art Of The Mash-Up Matters, 22 March 2015. Available at <https://techcrunch.com/2015/03/22/from-artistic-to-technological-mash-up/> [Last accessed 4 December 2020].

After all, like the supercut the fanvid is all about desire and cathexis, and moreover the supercut rose to prominence as a form of vernacular remix: that is to say, *lo-fi* recuts of popular TV and film. Indeed, fanvids are one part of the *prehistory* of the supercut, as is Birnbaum, but like Birnbaum, early fanvids barely resemble supercuts. The first fanvids, widely held to be Kandy Fong's mid-70's Star Trek slideshows, have little to do with the aesthetics of the supercut.

Clip: *What do you do with a drunken Vulcan?* (Kandy Fong, 2012 re-creation of 1975 slideshow)

Text on screen: Kandy Fong, in interview with Francesca Coppa: [pause to read]

"So the Star Trek club needed entertainment. And we decided that since John [Fong] had three cigar boxes filled with little pieces of film that had been edited from the TV show itself, because the TV show back then was all shot on film. And there were outtakes, there were extra takes, there were scenes that weren't used. So there was a lot of scenes that people hadn't seen before. And odd things like Spock sucking on a sucker, or laughing. So unusual scenes. And I said, 'Well, why don't we do something with this?' ... We took a bunch of the slides, mounted them as slides, and ended up using them to make a little show. And I wrote a little story about Ensign Fong aboard the Enterprise. And we sang the song, 'What Do You Do with a Drunken Vulcan?' And we illustrated it with the slides, and that was a big hit."

When Gene Roddenberry saw a tape of the slideshow/fanvid, he "wrote me back a letter giving me permission. Because he was trying to interest Paramount in the idea of the Star Trek movie. And by—[being] able to show that, 'Hey, this person is going around the country to conventions and people are very excited to see something they haven't seen before.' He thought that it was really great to encourage me. I thought it was wonderful."

Coppa, F 2014 Interview with Kandy Fong. In Rehak, B (ed.) *Materiality and Object-Oriented Fandom*, special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* (16). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0535>. Available at: <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/535/431> [Last accessed 4 December 2020].

Over time, however, fanvids that more and more closely resembled supercuts began to emerge. But it should be noted here that the supercut was only one of many styles employed by vidders, and never, as far as I can tell, a dominant one. And while the notion of interpolating a single film or television franchise to desired characters, gestures, or glances goes back as far as *Rose Hobart* (1936), vidders have generally used their editing to motivate an alternate fan narrative (as in the slashvid), rather than to meticulously catalogue a list of examples of a trope.

Clips: *Oh Boy* (Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out, 1990)

*Wouldn't It Be Nice?* (Laura Shapiro, 2002)

*Buffy* (Chuck Jones, 2002)

*Rose Hobart* (Joseph Cornell, 1936)

*Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps* (Killa, 2005)

But that's not to say that other click-hungry creators didn't quickly fill this void.

Clips: *The Annie Gasp: A 'Community' Supercut* (Zach Prewitt, 21 Jun. 2012) [fAOoD4755pI]

*Julianne Moore Loves to Cry...* (hh1edits [Harry Hanrahan], 21 Sep. 2010) [d4uv0eD5Ufg]

*Jim Carrey Falls Down* (Shawn Kohne, 2 Jul. 2015) [bR67jDU6oCc]

*Bob's Burgers supercut: All of Tina's moans* (Bryan Menegus for Slacktory, 28 Sep. 2012) [F\_Xaluw6K6Q]

Owen Wilson Says WOW (Owenergy, 9 May 2015) [KILMIJ2tDkg]

In fact, if we consider Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart* (1936), the "first fanvid," we're forced to face up the fact that Cornell's evident obsession with the eponymous actress is not a subversion of Hollywood's cathexis-machine, but rather, an intensification of it.

Clip: *Rose Hobart* (Joseph Cornell, 1936)

Text on screen: "*Rose Hobart* is most commonly lauded as an experimental film, foundational for the American avant-garde in its subordination of Hollywood production methods and destruction of simple narrative. But insofar as Cornell's version is a fanfilm it is just as much Hollywood as the original. Cornell, whose greatest boxes celebrate Hollywood stars like Lauren Bacall, was surely not mounting a critique of Hollywood."

Ades, Dawn. "The Strangeness of Cornell's *Rose Hobart*." in Augaitis, Daina, Bruce Grenville, and Stephanie Rebeck, eds. *MashUp: The Birth of Modern Culture*. E.U.: Black Dog Publishing Limited, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2016. Print. Pp. 78-81, 81.)

Thus, the biggest problem with putting the origin of the supercut on the fanvid is that because fandom is precisely what the motion picture industry seeks to promote, it should come as no surprise that they produced celebratory compilations of beloved stars long before fans ever had the opportunity to.

Clip: *That's Entertainment!* (Jack Haley, Jr., 1974)

Consider, for instance, MGM's 1974 feature-length compilation *That's Entertainment*, a celebration of their back-catalog of musicals.

In this single film, editor Bud Friedgen offers three different inflections of the proto-supercut: First, the song "Dear Mr. Gable" from the film *Broadway Melody of 1938* (1937). Here Judy Garland plays a star-struck fan of Clark Gable singing to a scrapbook of her character's screen idol. In the middle of the original film, Friedgen inserts some extra footage, the film equivalent of a scrapbook: famous scenes and images from Gable's career. But like most scrapbooks, the star is the organizing principle here, so the montage feels more like a greatest-hits than the analysis of any trope, except perhaps for the winking.

But then, there's this montage of Esther Williams's screen pairings.

[Clip audio, Donald O'Connor: "During her career, she swam opposite some of MGM's most popular leading men. Some of them even got their hair wet."]

Since the kind of footage being collected derives from a narrower "search term," so to speak, some analysis of studio practice begins to peek through within what is still a celebration of spectacle.

Finally, there's the "Backyard Musicals" montage.

[Clip audio, Mickey Rooney in 1974 voice-over: "Audiences seemed to love the pictures, even though the plots were suspiciously alike." Mickey Rooney as various characters in the 'backyard musicals': "We can have our own great modern dance orchestra. We've got everything we need right here. We've got the brass, the piano, and the reeds. We can make our own arrangements and specialties, play for all the dances." / Mickey Rooney in *Strike Up the Band* (1940): "We've gotta have a great show, with a million laughs. And color! And a lot of lights to make it sparkle! And songs: wonderful songs with you out there selling them." Judy Garland: "Oh, it'll be wonderful." / Mickey Rooney: "Say, that's not a bad idea. We could put on our own show! That'd be different!"...]

Here, the precisely-selected clips already united by the Rooney/Garland star pairing serve to illustrate the studio's practice of recycling plot tropes—just like a modern supercut.

Before *That's Entertainment* (1974), there were other exercises in self-cannibalization, as in *Marilyn* (1963), a compilation of Marilyn Monroe's most famous moments, narrated by Rock Hudson.

Image: IMDb page for *Marilyn* (Henry Koster, 1963), Available at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0057290/> [Last accessed 4 December 2020].

The fact that this film is virtually forgotten underscores some of the difficulty in tracing the origins of the supercut. While Marilyn Monroe endures as a cultural icon and fan culture in general lives on, the products of and for that fan culture merely *express* a desire; they are not the *focus* of the desire itself. Hence, they seem to vanish from public attention quickly. The tradition of the star-compilation seems to date back to the 1920s, in the form of Oskar Kalbus's 1928 Ufa project *Henny Porten: Life and Career of a Film Actress*.

Images: IMDb page for *Henny Porten - Leben und Laufbahn einer Filmkünstlerin* (Oskar Kalbus, 1928), Available at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1348972> [Last accessed 4 December 2020].

Photograph of Henny Porten seated opposite Oskar Kalbus, from Bonte, A 2002 Happy End für eine Filmbibliothek? Die Filmbibliothek Kalbus in der Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg. In: *Theke. Informationsblatt der Mitarbeiterinnen und Mitarbeiter im Bibliothekssystem*, (2002), pp. 27-32.

Around this time, other projects like Terry Ramsaye's *The March of the Movies*, and others attempted a summary of the first three decades of film history. Hence, in the same year of the founding of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Hollywood produced something like the first Oscar-style magic-of-the-movies montage. But more on that later.

Image: *The March of the Movies* 1927 *National Board of Review Magazine* II(3) March 1927, p. 3.

Clips: excerpt from *His Musical Career* (Charlie Chaplin, 1914) featured in *The March of the Movies* (Terry Ramsaye, Otto Nelson, 1927)

excerpt from *The Lost World* (Harry O. Hoyt, 1925) featured in *The March of the Movies* (Terry Ramsaye, Otto Nelson, 1927)

excerpt from *The Automatic Moving Company* (Romeo Bossetti, 1912) featured in *The March of the Movies* (Terry Ramsaye, Otto Nelson, 1927)

Text on screen: \* amusingly, Ramsaye mis-identified this clip as a Georges Méliès film

Beyond self-congratulation, the industry also used re-edits of existing material in the form of clip shows and "cheaters" as a cost-saving measure. In the world of animation, shorts like *Betty Boop's Rise to Fame* (1934) and the *Tom and Jerry* cartoon "Smitten Kitten" (1952) employ a frame narrative to justify replaying segments of old cartoons, a technique soon adapted to the world of television, where characters would reminisce about earlier moments in the series, and longish clips of those moments would play. In the decades following, the editing pace tightened to the point that 90's clip shows began to resemble the list-of-examples aesthetic of the supercut.

Clips: *Betty Boop's Rise to Fame* (Dave Fleischer, 1934)

*Tom and Jerry*, Ep. 66: Smitten Kitten (William Hanna, Joseph Barbera, 1952)

*I Love Lucy*, S6E11: Christmas Show (James V. Kern, 1956)

*The Dick Van Dyke Show*, S5E32: The Last Chapter (Jerry Paris, John Rich, 1966)

*Family Matters*, S6E21: What's Up Doc? (Richard Correll, 1995)

*Seinfeld*, S6E14: The Highlights of a Hundred (ed. Janet Ashikaga, 1995)

[Clip audio, Seinfeld characters: "Box of Juju Fruits" / "Clark bar" / "I love Yoo-hoo" / "Ooh, Chunkys"]

While television recutters employed flashback framing to *preserve* narrativity in cheaters and clipshows, and while vidders recontextualized glances and gestures to suggest *alternate* narratives, so also a handful of filmmakers have plundered the pop-culture archive with a desire to *construct*, or *reconstruct*, narrative. In Miklos Kiss's aforementioned work on *Final Cut: Ladies and Gentlemen* (2012), he positions it within a sub-sub-genre of compilation editing that he calls the "narrative supercut."

Image: screenshot of title and opening paragraph of Kiss, Miklós. "Creativity Beyond Originality: György Pálfi's *Final Cut* as Narrative Supercut" *Senses of Cinema* 67 (July 2013).

Clip: *Final Cut: Ladies and Gentlemen* (György Pálfi, 2012)

In *Final Cut*, the clips add up to an archetypal boy-meets-girl ur-film, made up of cells of supercuts, but in the forerunners Kiss identifies, the editing does *not* group images according to paradigms; rather, it remixes old narratives into different narratives. There's Carl Reiner's film-noir send-up *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (1982), in which Steve Martin interacts with old footage of Ingrid Bergman, Humphrey Bogart, and others. There's Michel Hazanavicius's *La Classe Américaine* (1993), a miasma of non-sequiturs, expletives, and homophobic slurs dubbed into the mouths of old Hollywood actors, somehow with Canal+'s blessing. There's Christian Marclay's *Telephones* (1995), which we mentioned earlier. There's Woody Allen's first film, *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* (1967), a silly recut of the 1965 Japanese secret police film *Key of Keys*. To this list Kiss easily could have also added the Situationist provocation *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* (1973).

Clips: *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (Carl Reiner, 1982)

*La classe américaine* (Michel Hazanavicius, Dominique Mézerette, 1993)

*Telephones* (Christian Marclay, 1995)

*What's Up, Tiger Lily?* (Woody Allen, 1967)

*Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* (René Viénet, 1973)

Over time, the "narrative supercut" gradually emerged from these recuts as creators began to incorporate clips from more and more sources. After *Final Cut: Ladies and Gentlemen*, it's worth noting other recent narrative supercuts, like Charlie Shackleton's *Beyond Clueless* (2014), a feature-length investigation of the high-school movie, which uses the database approach of the supercut to demystify the tropes of the genre. It's worth mentioning the Anti-Banality Union's *Police Mortality* (2013), an agit-prop remix of police thrillers designed to expose and polemically subvert the ideology of that genre.

Clips: *Beyond Clueless* (Charlie Shackleton, 2014)

*Police Mortality* (Anti-Banality Union, 24 Feb. 2013) [60394827]

Several other projects have aimed to piece back together individual stories rather than whole genres, as in Geoff Klock's *Hamlet Mash-Up*, which compresses nearly 200 different versions of or references to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into a 13-minute summary, or Heath Waterman's *Twelve Hundred Ghosts*, an hour-long patchwork of 400 different versions of *A Christmas Carol*, which retells Dickens's tale in its entirety, in order, barely repeating itself. Finally, there's Maddin and Johnson's *The Green Fog*, which remakes Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) out of other films shot in San Francisco.

Clips: *Hamlet Mash Up* (Geoff Klock, 7 May 2013) [mFZT4gOq8io]

*Twelve Hundred Ghosts - A Christmas Carol in Supercut* (Heath Waterman, 8 Dec. 2016) [UF\_rKE3nIol]

*The Green Fog* (Guy Maddin, Evan Johnson & Galen Johnson, 2017)

If the *traditional* supercut is something like a list of typefaces, in which each clip offers a variation or interpretation of a given trope, just as each font puts its own spin on a character set, then the *narrative* supercut, and especially its ancestors, has more in common with a ransom note. The former categorizes and lists; the latter pilfers for its own purposes.

Video: screen recording of the script for this video in Microsoft Word, running through a series of typefaces

Image: screenshot of the ransom note from *The Big Lebowski* (Ethan and Joel Coen, 1999)

Oh, as an aside: the spoken-word equivalent of the ransom note furnished another sub-sub-genre of the compilation film that grew in popularity concurrently with the supercut.

Clips: *We Will Rock You* (Emergency Broadcast Network, ca. 1992)

*CNN Concatenated* (Omer Fast, 2002), single channel video loop, 18 min

*Barack Obama Singing Drink to That by Rihanna [OFFICIAL]* (baracksdubs, 4 Jan. 2012) [5hg1Tz3OT-8]

*Brian Williams Raps Snoop Dogg* (The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, cut by John MacDonald, 5 Jun. 2013) [6BgaLjvTtI]

[Clip audio: George H. W. Bush, each word taken from a different clip: “We will, we will rock you.” / CNN Anchors, each word taken from a different clip: “What have we done to deserve this? What could we have done to prevent it from happening?” / Barack Obama, each word taken from a different clip: “There’s a party at the bar; everybody put your glasses up, and I’ll drink to that.” / Brian Williams (NBC News anchor), each word taken from a different clip: “Death Row is the label that pays me, so just chill till the next episode.”]

Clips: *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* (Woody Allen, 1967)

*Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* (René Viénet, 1973)

*Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (Carl Reiner, 1982)

*La classe américaine* (Michel Hazanavicius, Dominique Mézerette, 1993)

*Telephones* (Christian Marclay, 1995)

*Police Mortality* (Anti-Banality Union, 24 Feb. 2013) [60394827]

*Final Cut: Ladies and Gentlemen* (György Pálfi, 2012)

*Beyond Clueless* (Charlie Lyne, 2014)

But again, despite the fact that remixes from *What's Up Tiger Lily* (1967) to *La Classe Americaine* (1993) eventually converge with supercut aesthetics, it's misguided at best to put them in the lineage of the supercut – not just because they don't paradigmatically categorize images like a supercut, but because plenty of films before them were already recutting existing footage into new shapes.

The creator nearly everyone mentions in this regard is Bruce Conner.

Clip: *A Movie* (Bruce Conner, 1958)

Kiss points to him (2013), and Rebick (2016, p. 147) and McCormack (2011) also accord him a favored place in their histories.

Images: Pages 146 and 147 of Rebick, S 2016 *The Invention of the Supercut*. In: Augaitis, D et al *MashUp: The Birth of Modern Culture*. Vancouver: Black Dog Publishing Limited, pp. 146-151.

Title and one paragraph of McCormack, T 2011 *Compilation Nation: The History and the Rise of the Supercut*, 25 April, 2011. Available at <http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/compilation-nation-20110425> [Last accessed 4 December, 2020.]

Conner's influence is enormous, at least if we judge by the number of creators who cite him as an influence; but as I've already argued about Dara Birnbaum, the fanvid, and *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (1982), Conner's style of editing often doesn't do what a supercut does, and moreover, he didn't invent the notion of recutting ephemeral films and newsreels anyway. For one thing, at the very same time as Conner made his first film, *A Movie*, at least a handful of other creators independently pioneered similar aesthetics.

Clips: *The Banner of Youth* (Walerian Borowczyk, Jan Lenica, 1957)  
*Cowboy and 'Indian' Film* (Raphael Montañez Ortíz, 1958)

Montañez Ortiz, apart from ritually deconstructing a print of *Winchester '73* (1950) with a tomahawk, made at least one other film using some of the A-Bomb and racing footage that Conner loved.

Image: screenshot of the Smithsonian American Art Museum's online record of *Newsreel* (Raphael Montañez Ortíz, 1958), Available at <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/newsreel-80356> [Last accessed 5 December 2020]

But more crucially, as Conner himself acknowledged in an interview with Scott MacDonald, found footage filmmaking didn't originate in the avant-garde. Conner says he got it from a Marx Brothers gag.

Image: screenshot of MacDonald, S 1988 *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*. Berkeley, University of California Press, p. 253. The excerpt reads:

"MacDonald: I was talking to Robert Nelson recently, and he talked about how impressed he was by your work when he was starting out and how he was strongly influenced by you. I can't think of early filmmakers whose work is particularly like yours. Were there people who had a lot of influence on you, or did the films grow mostly out of collage work?"

Conner: *A Movie* started from seeing *Duck Soup*. There's a war going on, and the Marx brothers are surrounded in a farm house. Groucho says, "We need help," and all of a sudden you see soldiers and airplanes and dolphins and giraffes and everything else running to help them. I saw that movie when I was sixteen."

Clip: *Duck Soup* (Leo McCarey, 1933)

[Clip audio, Groucho Marx: "This is Firefly talking. Send help at once!" Dispatcher, through radio: "Help is on the way." Groucho: "Carry on, men, help is on the way!" Various sounds of sirens, motorcycles, runners]

On top of that, Jay Leyda points out that the gag in *Duck Soup* wasn't even original, but appeared in at least two different silent films before it.

Text on screen: "Rumours of more imaginative distortions of newsreel materials constantly emerge from the years before sound. There is, for example, a memory of *The Cruise of Jasper B.*, made in 1926, in which, possibly satirically, all the navies in the world were shown racing to a rescue."

In a footnote, he adds: "This sequence inspired Ivor Montagu to press further into compilation fantasy: in *Bluebottles* a policeman's whistle summons the navies and armies of the world, over sands, oceans and battlefields."

Leyda, Jay. *Films Beget Films: A Study of the Compilation Film*. Hill and Wang, 1964, p. 20.

Clips: *The Cruise of the Jasper B.* (James W. Horne, 1926)  
*Bluebottles* (Ivor Montagu, 1928)

This suggests that the practice of comically inserting a series of stock shots of mass mobilization may have emerged as a natural extension of newsreel practice, since newsreel production companies occasionally collected popular old footage into topical compilations. A quick look reveals that many such topical compilations were made in the silent era and after, and for precisely the same reason why YouTube aggregators cobble together everything from Fails to Sports highlights to Oddly Satisfying compilations now: concatenation intensifies cathexis. When we like something, we'd like to see lots of it even more.

Images of catalog entries for: *Winter Sports* (Charles Urban Trading Company, c. 1906)

*Here and There in the British Isles* (Gaumont Company, c. 1931)

*Historic Flights* (Vickers Aviation, 1932)

*Interesting Incidents [Here and There No. 4]* (Kineto, c. 1916)

*Modern China* (Charles Urban Trading Company, c. 1910)

*Pathé's Pictorial, No. 115* (Pathé Frères Cinema, n.d.)

*Royal Remembrances* (Gaumont Company, c. 1929)

*Russo-Japanese War Programme* (Unknown British producer, 1905)

*Scientific Tit-Bits* (Kineto, c. 1917)

*So This is America (a Castle novelty)* (Castle films, c. 1927)

*Through Three Reigns* (Cecil Hepworth, c. 1922)

*Twenty Years Ago* (British Screen Classics, c. 1928)

All images from: *National Film Archive Catalogue, Part II: Silent Non-Fiction Films, 1895-1934*. The British Film Institute, 1960. Available at <https://archive.org/details/nationalfilmarch00nati> [Last accessed 5 December 2020]

Images of catalog entries for: *The Cry of the World* (Louis de Rochemont for IFF - Fox, 1932)

*This is America* (Gilbert Seldes, 1933)

*The Immortal swan* (Edward Nakhimov, 1935)

*Wings over Everest* (Geoffrey Barkas and Ivor Montagu, 1934)

*Kaiser Wilhelm II* (Kaiser Film Company, 1913-14)

*The Life of Villa* (D. W. Griffith for Mutual, 1914)

*America's Answer* (Committee on Public Information, 1918)

*Behind the German lines* (Leo Lasko, 1927)

*European armies in action* (George Kleine, 1914)

*Lisbon before and after the revolution* (Gaumont, 1910)

*The First World War* (Truman Talley, et al, for Fox, 1934)

*Forgotten Men* (Samuel Cummins, et al, for Jewel Productions, 1933)

*Paramount travel pictures—South American series* (Paramount, 1915)

All images from: *The Film Index: A Bibliography, Vol. 1: The Film as Art*. H. W. Wilson Co., 1941.

Text on screen [footnote]: In hindsight, the major pioneers of the found footage experimental film left hints at their debt to the newsreel: Conner edited *A Movie* (1958) from Castle Films newsreel compilations, Montanez Ortiz named one of his early films "Newsreel," and the 1936 premiere of Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart* took place at an event titled "Goofy Newsreels."

It's hard to nail down the origins of the remix aesthetic in cinema, *not simply* because filmmakers may have also been influenced by practices outside of film, from Dada to photocollage, but because the notion of making films out of other films goes back to the birth of the medium.

Images: Hannah Höch, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife through the Beer-Belly of the Weimar Republic*, 1919, collage of pasted papers, 90 x 144 cm

John Heartfield, *Hurray, the Butter is All Gone!*, 1935

The first time a transformative combination of two films was copyrighted happened no later than 1903.

Clip: *Davey Jones' Locker* (Frederick Armitage, 1900)

Image: catalog entry for *Davey Jones' Locker* from Niver, Kemp R. *Motion Pictures from the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection, 1894-1912*, edited by Bebe Bergsten, U of California P., 1967, p. 325. The entry reads, in part: "The production was made by combining two films shot in 1897, *The Wreck of the Steamer Richmond Off the Coast of New Jersey*, and *The Dancing Skeleton*."

And as early as 1898, Francis Doublier, one of Lumière's operators, re-narrativized some existing actuality footage to make a quick buck. Jay Leyda recounts the tale in his classic history of the compilation film, *Films Beget Films*. "While [Doublier] was showing the Lumière films through the Jewish districts of South Russia, the public's interest in the Dreyfus case persuaded him to ... 'put together a scene of a French army parade led by a captain, one of their street-scenes in Paris showing a large building, a shot of a Finnish tug going out to meet a barge, and a scene of the Delta of the Nile. In this sequence, with a little help from the commentator, and with a great deal of help from the audience's imagination, these scenes told the following story: Dreyfus before his arrest, the Palais de Justice where Dreyfus was court-martialed, Dreyfus being taken to the battleship, and Devil's Island where he was imprisoned, all supposedly taking place in 1894 [before the invention of the Cinématographe]."

Text on screen: "While [Doublier] was showing the Lumière films through the Jewish districts of South Russia, the public's interest in the Dreyfus case persuaded him to ... 'put together a scene of a French army parade led by a captain, one of their street-scenes in Paris showing a large building, a shot of a Finnish tug going out to meet a barge, and a scene of the Delta of the Nile. In this sequence, with a little help from the commentator, and with a great deal of help from the audience's imagination, these scenes told the following story: Dreyfus before his arrest, the Palais de Justice where Dreyfus was court-martialed, Dreyfus being taken to the battleship, and Devil's Island where he was imprisoned, all supposedly taking place in 1894 [before the invention of the Cinématographe]. The new subject was enthusiastically acclaimed, and their two-day stands were jammed as word got around. Doublier banked on an ignorance of dates and a swift departure from each success..."

Leyda, Jay. *Films Beget Films: A Study of the Compilation Film*. Hill and Wang, 1964, pp. 13-14.

[the films above are for illustrative purposes only; it is unknown which four Lumière views Doublier actually screened.]

Clips: *Le commandant Marchand au Cercle Militaire à Paris* [Lumière cat. no. 1032] (unknown operator, 1899)

*Place de la Comédie* [no Lumière catalogue number] (unknown operator, 1896)

*Liverpool: La rade* [Lumière cat. no. 702] (Alexandre Promio, 1897)

*Egypte: Panorama des Rives du Nil* [Lumière cat. no. 386] (Alexandre Promio, 1897)

To review: the point of the preceding analysis was *not* to claim that the work of Birnbaum, Conner, and the others do not belong on the lineage of the supercut, but rather to point out the problems with histories of the supercut that cast too narrow a net. The common errors – not going back far enough, centering the history on an important but stylistically dissimilar film, or assuming that the supercut must've started in the avant-garde or even fan remix – are really the same error showing different faces.

Text on screen: [the table of contents as given before, but with an additional label on the first section: "Archaeological errors, Morphological errors, Errors of scope or selection bias: often the 'avant-garde assumption' or the 'fandom assumption.'"]

In all cases, the writers assume that the supercut had to have been *invented*, when in fact it emerged *metaculturally*. Put another way, the supercut *isn't* a revolutionary editing *technique*, but the material expression of a *mode of thinking* about history and about images that bubbled up in many fields at once.

Text on screen: The supercut is not a revolutionary editing *technique*, but the material expression of a *mode of thinking* about history and images.

Any meaningful history of the supercut must therefore put all its genealogical lines in conversation. Early-cinema scholar Andre Gaudreault points out that cinema itself was the result of the convergence of many lines of development, or “cultural series,” as he calls them, and that different cultural series mattered more or less to different commentators according to their particular investment with cinema. So also for the supercut.

Text on screen: [flow chart titled “Cultural Series of Cinema” appears piece by piece:  
“Projection: Kircher’s Magic lantern (1650s)” [with image of magic lantern from: Athanasius Kircher, *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae*, 1671, p. 768, available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic\\_lantern#/media/File:Optic\\_Projection\\_fig\\_404.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_lantern#/media/File:Optic_Projection_fig_404.jpg) [Last accessed 22 December 2020]],  
“Niépce and Daguerre: Photography (1820-30s)” [with image: Louis Daguerre, Boulevard du Temple, 1838],  
“Motion toys: Horner’s zoetrope (1830s), Plateau’s phenakistoscope (1840s)” [with clips: Eadweard Muybridge, *A Couple Waltzing* [Phenakistoscope disc], 1893, animated [Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Phenakistoscope\\_3g07690b.gif](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Phenakistoscope_3g07690b.gif) [Last accessed 12 December 2020]]; and *Things – Zoetrope* (bre pettis, 14 Dec. 2008) [-3yarT\_h2ws],  
“Reynaud’s Projecting Praxinoscope (1880s)” [with image: Louis Poyet, Émile Reynaud’s Projecting Praxinoscope, published in *La Nature, revue des sciences*, no. 492 (1882), p. 357, available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lanature1882\\_praxinoscope\\_projection\\_reynaud.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lanature1882_praxinoscope_projection_reynaud.png) [Accessed 22 December 2020]],  
“Instantaneous photography” over an arrow pointing from “Niépce and Daguerre: Photography (1820-30s)” to “Marey and Muybridge: Chronophotography (1870s)” [with image: Eadweard Muybridge, *The Horse in Motion*, 1879],  
“Parkes & Hyatt’s celluloid (1840-60s)” pointing toward “Goodwin’s flexible roll film (1880s),”  
“Hornblower’s eccentric ratchet for sewing machines (1870s),”  
“ALSO: Edison’s Phonograph (1870s), Stage illusions like Pepper’s Ghost (1860s), And more,” all pointing toward “Cinema” at top of screen.]

There is no *history* of the supercut, only *histories* of the supercut, all of which are incorrect in isolation. And as we’ve already seen, these histories often involve decades of prelude to landmark works.

Text on screen: Some of the cultural series of the supercut  
Archiving, collecting, listing, learning, montage, compilation editing, the movie industry’s recycling of clips into cheaters and best-ofs, the culture industry’s market motivation to repeat successful tropes, the structures of myth-making more generally, cinephilia, canonicity, essayism, media studies or visual culture as a discipline, the kind of collage made possible by the mechanical reproducibility of images, Dadaism, Situationism, the nascent notion of the database, remix, sampling, plunderphonics, digital democratization and the mass availability of consumer copies of movies, cabinets of curiosities, museums, scrapbooks, patchwork fiber arts, thesauruses, concordances

The same is true for Marclay, if not more so. No matter how seismic his 24-hour video installation *The Clock* seemed, the idea of arranging popular footage into an existing lexical, numerical, or horological

sequence appeared earlier, in videos that counted down from 100, recited the alphabet, or ticked off 60 seconds' worth of time.

Clips: bootleg footage of an audience watching *The Clock* (Christian Marclay, 2010), shot at LACMA and posted as *Midnight* (Carolina Natalie, 22 Apr. 2013) [iZe55tTAbw4]

*Teaching the Alphabet* (Volker Schreiner, 2007)

*100 Movies, 100 Quotes, 100 Numbers* (AlonzoMosleyFBI, 19 Feb. 2007) [FExqG6LdWHU]

*60 Seconds* (Christoph Girardet, 2003)

Christian Marclay's *Telephones* followed on the heels of plenty of other worthy experiments in the supercut form, including Claude Closky's *200 Mouths to Feed* (1994), a compilation of bite-shots in television advertisements that was made a year before *Telephones*; Mark Rappaport's *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (1992), which deployed a series of montages to suggest that secrets from the closeted gay actor's private life expressed themselves in encoded ways on the big screen, and Matthias Müller's *Home Stories* (1990-91), which collected a series of unresolved affects from classic melodramas.

Clips: *Telephones* (Christian Marclay, 1995)

*200 Mouths to Feed* (Claude Closky, 1994)

*Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (Mark Rappaport, 1992)

*Home Stories* (Matthias Müller, 1990-91)

But just before this trio of thoughtful, poetic, analytic works, the cinephilic supercut crystallized in the latter half of the 1980s. This period saw three key works: Giuseppe Tornatore's *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), with its final montage of censored kisses, Chuck Workman's short film *Precious Images* (1986), and Agnès Varda's nearly-forgotten gem *You Have Beautiful Stairs, You Know?* (1986).

Clips: *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988)

*Precious Images* (Chuck Workman, 1986) [the version shown here is the mid-90's re-release]

*You have beautiful stairs, you know* (Agnès Varda, 1986)

First, note that all three of these films foreground desire – the stairs are beautiful; the images—precious; the kisses—the perfect synecdoche of consummation. As I suggested in my discussion of *That's Entertainment* (1974), stoking desire has always been Hollywood's business. The Oscars that were bestowed on both Workman and Tornatore...

Clips: *Precious Images winning the Oscar® for Live Action Short* [at the 59th Academy Awards® in 1987] (Oscars, 4 Feb. 2016) [A10X42GHva8]

*'Cinema Paradiso' Wins Foreign Language Film: 1990 Oscars* (Oscars, 25 Jul. 2013) [zHn9t88pJeY]

Text on screen: \* but not Varda, sigh

...indicate to me that the supercut challenged nothing in the status quo, but was rather, at best, an engineering breakthrough, an intensification of the desire-machine that Hollywood was already running.

Chuck Workman, who had a background in cutting trailers, pitched *Precious Images* (1986) to the Directors' Guild of America, who underwrote it, as a kind of "trailer" for motion picture history.

Clip: *DP/30: Chuck Workman, Magician: The Astonishing Life and Work of Orson Welles* (DP/30: The Oral History Of Hollywood (David Poland), 17 Nov. 2014) [3QiXA4irgal]

[Clip audio, Chuck Workman: "I probably said, 'Let's do a film with – a trailer of every great American film ever made – directed by a Director's Guild member.'"]

Charged with squeezing in as many clips as possible but restricted on the running time, Workman made a discovery: when syntagmatic context is cut away, paradigms offer the readiest form of linkage. At first, Workman tried to group films by genre, but soon discovered other paradigms: formal paradigms, like the close-up; spectacle-paradigms, like shots of slaps or hits; even editing can create its own paradigms by connecting movements in a way that transforms them into something new.

Text on screen: "I certainly didn't have a structure going into it. ... I went with genre. I decided finally that I wasn't going to arrange the film chronologically. I'd arrange it by genre, so in one section I'd have all the westerns. ... I was questioning genre because I didn't believe in it. Visually I was saying, 'I know you thinking these are all action movies, but in *Boy's Town* [1938], Spencer Tracy slapping Mickey Rooney is a piece of action, even though that's a sloppy, sentimental movie. So these *slaps* go together. It wasn't, 'let's put all the kisses together and all the slapstick,' so much as, 'let's cut a kiss from the animation *Lady and the Tramp* into the middle of these very romantic movies, so you can see the surprising resonance of an image from one genre to another."

Interview with Chuck Workman in MacDonald, Scott. *A Critical Cinema 4: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*. U of California P, 2005, p. 240.

These new patterns deliver a kind of pleasure in themselves, a pleasure that likely explains why he was soon hired to do all those infamous "Oscar montages" at Academy Award telecasts for the next couple decades.

Clips: Workman-produced montages from the 60<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards telecast (1988), 62<sup>nd</sup> Academy Awards telecast (1990), 64<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards telecast (1992), 70<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards telecast (1998), and 82<sup>nd</sup> Academy Awards telecast (2010).

Workman's montages teach desire – not just desire for this or that movie, but desire for the whole apparatus of moviemaking. Workman's matching editing imbues a sense of *connectedness* and *belongingness* to these images that delivers the *sense* or *message* of canonicity even to a viewer unfamiliar with the films.

In this context, it should come as no surprise that the cascade of kisses that caps *Cinema Paradiso* does not play by itself, but is intercut, over and over again, with shots of Salvatore *consuming* these images and being overcome with surplus emotion because of it.

Clip: *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988)

Images: screenshots of Salvatore watching the screen, *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988)

These reverse shots of Toto in effect *tutor* us as to how we should consume and react to these images. Nowadays, the reaction shots are no longer necessary [if they ever were]. In fact, the bond between the supercut and scopophilic desire is now so well-established that the supercut has become a site of desire for the act of watching itself. That shot of Salvatore watching the kisses now appears in supercuts of people in movies watching movies.

Clips: *Play* (Christoph Girardet & Matthias Müller, 2003)

*Movies in movies: A montage* (Clara Darko & Brutzelpretzel for Slacktory, 16 Jul. 2013) [GwGonPg8\_I8]

Finally on this point, a bit of irony. If it can be said that the supercut distills, synthesizes, and expresses contemporary cinephilia better than perhaps any other aesthetic technique available, I can't resist mentioning that neither Workman nor Varda were cinephiles.

Clips: *DP/30: Chuck Workman, Magician: The Astonishing Life and Work of Orson Welles* (DP/30: The Oral History Of Hollywood (David Poland), 17 Nov. 2014) [3QiXA4irgal]  
*The Beaches of Agnes* (Agnès Varda, 2008)

[Clip audio: Chuck Workman: "And what happened was—" David Poland, interviewer: "And were you a huge cinephile at that point? Were you a cineaste, or were you kind of—" Workman: "No, I went to the movies; I sort of knew them, but I didn't know a lot. I didn't know what I got to know after doing this same thing 25 times."

Guillaume-en-Égypte, a six-foot-tall cutout of an orange cartoon cat with a synthetic-sounding voice, the alter-ego of filmmaker Chris Marker, interviewing Agnès Varda: "Were you a film buff?" Varda: "No, I wasn't a film buff. I'd only seen 9 or 10 films by the age of 25. I didn't go to film school or work as an assistant. I used my imagination."]

Text on screen [footnote]: As it happens, Christian Marclay isn't a cinephile either. Daniel Zalewski writes, "I asked Marclay if he could identify various clips. Either he couldn't or he could answer in only the vaguest terms. 'That's French,' he said at one point, as Alain Delon spoke French. Later, I asked Marclay to name the last film he'd gone to see. He struggled to come up with a title, and, when he did, it was nearly a year old: 'The King's Speech.' 'I really know nothing about cinema,' he said. 'It's terrible.'"

Daniel Zalewski, "The Hours: How Christian Marclay created the ultimate digital mosaic." *The New Yorker*, March 4, 2012. Online: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/03/12/the-hours-daniel-zalewski> [Last Accessed: 12 December, 2020]

As I mentioned earlier, the idea of collecting bits of popular movie footage into a visual list of the greatest hits of cinema history goes back to the late 1920s, at about the moment when cinema was turning 30 and transitioning to sound.

Images: screenshot of a playlist of "Top 10" videos on the Cinefix YouTube channel, available at: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1AXWu-gGX6lcOGt0yaA9Cd\\_hkt\\_TwQIC](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1AXWu-gGX6lcOGt0yaA9Cd_hkt_TwQIC) [Accessed 6 Jan. 2019]

The March of the Movies 1927 *National Board of Review Magazine* II(3) March 1927, p. 3.

Clips: excerpt from *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1923) featured in *The March of the Movies* (Terry Ramsaye, Otto Nelson, 1927)

excerpt from *Jeux des reflets et de la vitesse* (Henri Chomette, 1925) featured in *The March of the Movies* (Terry Ramsaye, Otto Nelson, 1927)

excerpt from *Die Nibelungen, Part I* (Fritz Lang, 1924) featured in *The March of the Movies* (Terry Ramsaye, Otto Nelson, 1927)

Apart from Terry Ramsaye's *The March of the Movies*, other newsreel cutters cobbled together their own collections...

Clips: *March of the Movies* (J. Stuart Blackton, 1933)  
*The March of Time*, Vol. 5 No. 12: The Movies March On! (1939)

...and in Germany, Oskar Kalbus made for Ufa a series of revues of prior fiction films, beginning with *Henny Porten: Life and Career of a Film Actress* and arguably peaking with *Rund um die Liebe* in 1929, a title that roughly translates as "All About Love," a collection of then-classic romantic movie scenes. In a way, it directly anticipates *Cinema Paradiso* (1988).

Images: Ad for Ufa's Cross-Section Film series, 1928, reproduced in Cowan, Michael, "Cutting through the Archive: Querschnitt Montage and Images of the World in Weimar Visual Culture." *New German Critique* 120, Vol. 40, No. 3, Fall 2013, p. 5.

Photograph of Henny Porten seated opposite Oskar Kalbus, from Bonte, A 2002 Happy End für eine Filmbibliothek? Die Filmbibliothek Kalbus in der Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg. In: *Theke. Informationsblatt der Mitarbeiterinnen und Mitarbeiter im Bibliothekssystem*, (2002), pp. 27-32.

Clips: excerpt from *Der verlorene Schuh* (Ludwig Berger, 1923) featured in *Rund um die Liebe* (Oskar Kalbus, 1929)

excerpt from *Sumurun* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1920) featured in *Rund um die Liebe* (Oskar Kalbus, 1929)

excerpt from *Secrets of a Soul* (Georg Wilhelm Pabst, 1926) featured in *Rund um die Liebe* (Oskar Kalbus, 1929)

Text on screen: note: though *Rund um die Liebe* is likely a lost film, its contents were recorded on censor cards preserved in the German Federal Archive

But these montages are not an isolated phenomenon. No less a thinker than Siegfried Kracauer classified Kalbus's compilations alongside Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), calling out the entire cross-section film genre, writing, "They could be produced at low cost; and they offered a gratifying opportunity of showing much and revealing nothing."

Clip: *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927)

Text on screen: "*Berlin* inaugurated the vogue of cross-section or 'montage,' films. They could be produced at low cost; and they offered a gratifying opportunity of showing much and revealing nothing. Several films of that kind utilized stock material. One of them summarized the career of Henny Porten (1928); a second, similarly produced by Ufa, extracted love episodes from old movies (*Rund um die Liebe*, 1929)..."

Kracauer, Siegfried. "Montage" [1947]. In Jonathan Kahana, ed. *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism*. New York: Oxford UP, 2016, pp. 142-147, p. 146.

In a way, all the major cultural series of the supercut – from wanting to praise a canon, to wanting to sort an archive, to wanting to critically analyze patterns in culture – converge in the 1920s. And they do so amidst an impassioned debate about the ideological role and stylistics of editing in general. But as Michael Cowan argues in his excellent work on the German cross-section film, forerunners of the supercut do not emerge from that debate about *editing*, but rather from a concurrent debate about the *archive*. He writes, "The appeal of such cross-sectional montage... lay in its status as a model of ordering, one that promised to make sense of a rapidly expanding visual archive."

Image: screenshot of the title page of Cowan, Michael, "Cutting through the Archive: Querschnitt Montage and Images of the World in Weimar Visual Culture." *New German Critique* 120, Vol. 40, No. 3, Fall 2013, pp. 1-40.

Text on screen: "I read cross-sectional montage not only as a precursor to contemporary 'archival art' but also as an effort to come to terms with an 'archive' already present in the 1920s: namely, the proliferation of photographic and filmic images of the world. The appeal of such cross-sectional montage, I argue, lay in its status as a model of ordering, one that promised to make sense of a rapidly expanding visual archive." (Cowan 3-4)

What Ruttmann discovered in *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, and, moreover, in his follow-up global-scale "city symphony" *Melody of the World*, is that mere surface-level matching beguilingly imparts a *sense* of order in the absence of any meaningful historical method.

Clip: *Melody of the World* (Walter Ruttmann, 1929)

Hence Kracauer's charge, repeated in *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), that Ruttmann parroted the techniques of Soviet montage while voiding them of their politics. And in Ruttmann's wake there followed a parade of filmmakers stringing together bits of motion for the pure dynamic pleasure of it, leading up to contemporary supercuts entirely defined by the match-on-action.

Clips: *A Movie* (Bruce Conner, 1958)  
*Beginning* (Artavazd Peleshian, 1967)  
*Overlord* (Stuart Cooper, 1975)  
David Bowie and Queen: *Under Pressure* music video (David Mallet, 1981)

In Ruttmann and his successors, the sensation of awe substitutes for earnest understanding. When he compiles images of figures fighting, or figures in worship, his montage tends to wallpaper over difference. The visual match is tautological, but because the editing leaps such great distances, it gives the impression of a kind of metaphysical connectedness. If these images tend toward uncritical consumption, towards surrender and cathexis, that's because there's rarely anything else to be found in them.

Clips: *The Right Stuff* (Philip Kaufman, 1983)  
*Uomini, anni, vita* [People, Years, Life] (Yervant Gianikian, Angela Ricci Lucchi, 1990)  
*America's Funniest Home Videos* (Season 5, Ep. 2, 1993)  
*Naqoyqatsi* (Godfrey Reggio, 2002)  
*Bodysong* (Simon Pummell, 2003)  
*To the Happy Few* (Thomas Draschan, Stella Friedrichs, 2003)  
*Pure* (Jacob Bricca, 2009)  
*The Road Movie* [Doroga] (Dmitrii Kalashnikov, 2016)

Ruttmann's logic is *phenotypic* – he combines images according to surface similarities – and thus, no further analysis is required by the viewer. By contrast, the Soviet analog of cross-section montage is *genotypic* – the people and objects depicted have something in common that is not visually apparent, and the montage is designed to spark viewer consciousness of it.

Clips: *Melody of the World* (Walter Ruttmann, 1929)  
*One Sixth of the World* (Dziga Vertov, 1926)  
Text on screen: "phenotypic" montage [labeling the Ruttmann clip]  
"genotypic" montage [labeling the Vertov clip]

In the case of Vertov's agitprop essay *One Sixth of the World* (1926), which is a kind of *country-symphony*, he combines footage from all across Russia to convey an image of a nation to itself, using linkage to overcome distances and differences.

In Eisenstein, the proto-Supercut emerges from a different essayistic impulse – the need to discover filmic means to bring about what Deleuze called "qualitative leaps" in consciousness.

Clip: *October: Ten Days that Shook the World* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1927)  
Text on screen: "qualitative leaps" [labeling the Eisenstein clip]

Consider the famous "God and Country" montage in *October*. General Kornilov leads his troops on a counter-revolutionary assault against the Soviet stronghold in Petrograd, saying his attack is "in the

name of God and Country.” At this moment, Eisenstein brings the narrative to a halt to ask, through editing, what exactly Kornilov means by invoking the word “god.”

As you see, what’s going on here is the opposite of Ruttmann’s form of matching linkage. In Eisenstein’s own words, he means to create conflict. “The conflict in this case was between the concept and the symbolization of God. While ... each successive image... [m]aintain[s] the denotation of ‘God,’ the images increasingly disagree with our concept of God, inevitably leading to individual conclusions about the true nature of deities.”

Text on screen: “A number of religious images, from a magnificent Baroque Christ to an Eskimo [sic] idol, were cut together. The conflict in this case was between the concept and the symbolization of God. While idea and image appear to accord completely in the first statue shown, the two elements move further from each other with each successive image. Maintaining the denotation of ‘God,’ the images increasingly disagree with our concept of God, inevitably leading to individual conclusions about the true nature of deities. In this case, too, a chain of images attempted to achieve a purely intellectual resolution, resulting from a conflict between a preconception and a *gradual discrediting of it in purposeful steps.*”

Eisenstein, Sergei. “A Dialectical Approach to Film Form” [1929]. *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, edited and translated by Jay Leyda. Harcourt, Inc., 1949, p. 62.

In the various cultural series of the supercut, it’s tempting to argue that the *analytic* pole of the form begins with Eisenstein’s God and Country montage. But no matter its anthropological or philosophical depth, this scene lacks one crucial ingredient for the supercut: *archival forensics*.

Text on screen: A briskly-cut  
video list of  
appropriated [this word is highlighted]  
moving images  
sharing some specific matching characteristic  
and offered as a representative cross-section of that characteristic.

That is, he might identify a cultural pattern, but he didn’t find it by digging through old footage. Thankfully, another Soviet was pioneering that practice, and in the very same year. Her name was Esfir Shub and her debut film is 1927’s *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*. She combed through over 60,000 meters of archive footage to craft a Soviet counter-narrative to the years leading up to the October revolution.

Clip: *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (Esfir Shub, 1927)

While Shub’s films do not in any way resemble a modern supercut, she seems to have originated the idea that compilation can be a *transformative* action – that is, that compilation creates something qualitatively new, rather than just a re-bundling of the old. Thanks to Shub, later directors, most notably Loader and the Raffertys, performed even more thorough satirical archival forensics. The final montage in *The Atomic Café* (1982) develops Shub’s approach into an impressive early supercut that *deconstructs* the official 50’s-era narratives of nuclear attack by re-constructing ephemera like newsreels, public information shorts, and classroom atomic scare films into an ur-narrative of enforced ignorance in the face of horror.

Clip: *The Atomic Café* (Jayne Loader, Kevin & Pierce Rafferty, 1982)

By about 1970, the Shub approach of archival forensics and the Eisenstein method of deconstructive listing seem to have linked up with the emerging field of Visual Culture.

Clip: *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (Esfir Shub, 1927)

October: *Ten Days that Shook the World* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1927)

Text on screen: ["archival forensics" labels the Shub clip, "deconstructive listing" labels the Eisenstein clip, and "visual culture" appears centered beneath both clips]

Most basically, the field of visual culture investigates how images circulate to support the status quo of power, so as to make it seem natural, and unquestionable.

Clip: *Ways of Seeing*, Ep. 4, Commercial Art (John Berger, Michael Dibb, 1972)

Visual Culture was a radical demystification of received art history dogmas, because it treats images not as works of genius, but as units of reproduction within a discourse. One of its first practitioners, John Berger, employed proto-supercuts to make his case in his 1972 four-part television documentary *Ways of Seeing*. He seems to have arrived at the notion of the visual list, an aesthetic also present in the earlier print version of *Ways of Seeing*, precisely because it's necessary to see a lot of images to triangulate the ideology that produced them. As he says:

Clip: *Ways of Seeing*, Ep. 3, Collectors and Collecting (John Berger, Michael Dibb, 1972)

[Clip audio, John Berger: "The tradition of oil painting was made up of hundreds of thousands of unremarkable works hung all over the walls of galleries and private houses, rather in the same way as the reserve collection is still hung in the National Gallery. If, as we are normally taught to do, we emphasize the genius of the few and concentrate only on the exceptional works, we will misunderstand what the tradition was really about."]

Clip: *Ways of Seeing*, Ep. 2, Women in Art (John Berger, Michael Dibb, 1972)

With the ensuing appearance of feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory, and other disciplines that examine media representation, it became urgently necessary to catalogue the tropes from mainstream culture that marginalized and oppressed women, LGBTQ people, people of color, and other groups. It didn't take long until the supercut became *the* favored technique for demonstrating patterns of discrimination in movies and TV.

An early glimpse of the representation-supercut appears in the Oscar-winning antiwar documentary *Hearts and Minds* (1974), in which a brief montage of Hollywood films establishes the discursive underpinning of anti-Asian racism.

Clip: *Hearts and Minds* (Peter Davis, ed. Lynzee Klingman, Susan Martin, 1974)

[Clip audio: Veteran being interviewed: "I just wanted them because they were the opposition—they were the enemy" / various old fiction films: "Stinking little savages! Wipe 'em out, I say! Wipe 'em out! Wipe 'em off the face of the earth!" / "Will we ever understand these Eastern races?" / Bob Hope: "Hit me, Poon Soon" [gargles drink] / "You hideous yellow monster!" / Another veteran, being interviewed: "I wanted to go out and kill some gooks, you know?"]

Though the montage in *Hearts and Minds* was in service of a broader argument, soon short-form and then feature-length documentaries took up patterns in representation as their sole subject.

Clips: *Killing Us Softly* (Margaret Lazarus, Renner Wunderlich, 1979) ["Women hacked apart" montage]  
*Ethnic Notions* (Marlon Riggs, 1987) [Jim Crow illustrations montage]  
*The Celluloid Closet* (Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman, 1995) [Anti-gay hate speech montage]  
*Gringo in Mañanaland* (DeeDee Halleck, 1995) ['Si señor' montage]  
*Reel Bad Arabs* (Sut Jhally, Jack Shaheen, 2006) ['Kill 'em all' montage]  
*The Slanted Screen* (Jeff Adachi, 2006) [White actors in yellowface montage]  
*Equal+Opposite* (Rahne Alexander, 2008) [37226483] [Compilation of violence toward trans and gender-variant people]  
*Reel Injun* (Catherine Bainbridge, Neil Diamond, 2010) [White actors in redface montage]  
*Latinos Beyond Reel* (Chyng Sun, Miguel Parker, 2012) [Latina stereotypes montage]

As I see it, the shift from traditional Western art history to Visual Culture was a bit like the shift from classical mechanics to thermodynamics in physics. Gone was the approach of studying a few favored objects in isolation; the new method sought to define the overall behavior of a *fluid*, or of a *culture*, by identifying statistical patterns within it. The preponderance of examples given in these supercuts explodes the faulty idea that bigotry is personal or individual by demonstrating how stereotypes repeat across a culture, and thus belong to a system of discrimination – a discourse.

More recently, as marginalized groups began to receive more and better depictions in mainstream film and TV, vidders began to produce supercuts to celebrate newfound *positive* representation.

Clip: "*The Greatest*" - a multifandom vid of characters of color in recent SF/F/horror, by bironic (closetfan, 26 May 2018) [yIHZd0-sj\_Q]

Before we move on, I just want to point out that the For-God-and-Country scene in October also sets up another line of formal development -- one based on collaging *stillness*.

Clips: *October: Ten Days that Shook the World* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1927)  
*Statues also Die* (Chris Marker, 1953)

Most literally, we see another montage of statuary in Chris Marker's *Statues Also Die* (1953), but expanding the boundaries of stillness to include still images, we find precedent in Cavalcanti's parade of Paris paintings in *Rien que les heures* (1926).

Clips: *Rien que les heures* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1926)

Several decades later, a number of filmmakers began to experiment with fusillades of photographs, illustrations, magazine clippings, and so on – as a technique sometimes called "kinestasis."

Text on screen: kinestasis  
Clips: *REcreation* (Robert Breer, 1956-7)  
*Wail* (Jeff Keen, 1960)  
*Very Nice, Very Nice* (Arthur Lipsett, 1961)  
*The Human Face is a Monument* (Stan VanDerBeek, 1965)  
*Elégia* (Zoltán Huszárík, 1965)  
*3000 Years of Art* (Dan McLaughlin, 1968)  
*American Time Capsule* (Chuck Braverman, 1968)

*The Movie Orgy* (Joe Dante, 1968)  
*Frank Film* (Frank & Caroline Mouris, 1973)

Skipping forward a few decades, this technique now appears in web shorts and mainstream films alike.

Clips: *The Big Short* (Adam McKay, ed. Hank Corwin, 2015)  
*In a Nutshell* (Fabio Friedli, 2018) [307578337]

There even abstract examples, like Jordan Belson's *Bop-Scotch* (1952), which collages photographs of designs on pavement and sidewalks, or quite a lot of Jodie Mack's work. This one uses designs on the inside of business reply mail envelopes.

Clips: *Bop-Scotch* (Jordan Belson, 1952)  
*Unsubscribe Series #1 - Special Offer Inside* (Jodie Mack, 2010)

Moreover, just as the Cross-Section genre in Germany grew out of an earlier print tradition, there's no reason why the database aesthetics of the supercut should be limited to the world of film.

Clip: *Melody of the World* (Walter Ruttmann, 1929)  
Images: images juxtaposed in the journal *Der Querschnitt* (1926), reproduced in Cowan, Michael, "Cutting through the Archive: Querschnitt Montage and Images of the World in Weimar Visual Culture." *New German Critique* 120, Vol. 40, No. 3, Fall 2013, pp. 17-18.

There are, in fact, a great number of video installations, multipanel photographic works and paintings, as well as even sculptures and found-object installations that apply the listing logic of the supercut to the world of fine art.

Images: Frances Bagley, *Witness*, 2007, multimedia video installation, dimensions variable  
Francesco Vezzoli, *Crying Divas from the Screenplays of an Embroiderer II*, 1999, laser prints on canvas with metallic embroidery, 13x17 in each  
Arman, *Infinity of Typewriters and Infinity of Monkeys and Infinity of Time = Hamlet*, 1962, mixed media with typewriters  
Dieter Roth, *Solo Scenes*, 1998, 131 VHS tapes on 128 monitors with VCRs, shelving  
Song Dong, *Waste Not*, 2006, installation of 10,000 objects owned by the artist's mother (MoMA installation)

Some unambiguously translate the supercut aesthetic to the gallery, as in Uklanski's *The Nazis*, a collection of 164 cropped images of film and TV actors portraying Nazis. Plenty of other artists have also found and collected images from journalism or Google Street View or postcards, and so on, into either precise databases or looser, ever-expanding archives.

Images: Piotr Uklański, *The Nazis*, 1998, 164 chromogenic photographs, 14x10 in each  
Antoni Muntadas, *The Construction of Fear (details)*, 2008  
Mishka Henner, *No Man's Land* [selected images], 2011-2013  
Susan Hiller, *Rough Seas*, 2012-14, 20 archival dry prints, 10x15cm each  
Zoe Leonard, *You see I am here after all*, 2008, 3,883 vintage postcards, 11 x 10.5 x 147 ft., as installed at Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, 2018  
Fischli & Weiss, *Visible World*, 1987-2001, 3000 color photograph transparencies on 15 light-box tables, 2805x69x83 cm  
Gerhard Richter, *Atlas*, 1962–ongoing, found photographs, (802 sheets as of 2013)

And in the world of sculpture and installation art, we see the same: found objects collected and arranged by color, by size, into grids. Even as I collect and arrange pictures of these artworks into this video essay, I continually ask, where are the borders of the supercut, or of the database form more generally?

Images: Douglas Coupland, *The Brain*, 2000–2014, mixed-media installation  
Bharti Kher, *The hot winds that blow from the West*, 2011, 131 radiators, 195x264x254 cm  
David T. Waller, *Car Atlas - Rainbow*, 2010  
Tony Cragg, *Minster*, 1987-90, car parts, various dimensions  
Barton Beneš, from the *Museums* series, 1999, array of found objects  
Peter Coffin, *Untitled (Blue Objects)*, 2009  
Matthew Plummer Fernandez, *Every Mickey*, 2017, SLS Nylon, Acrylic Paint, STL File, 51x24x49cm (every model of Mickey Mouse the artist found online, compiled as one)  
Stuart Haygarth, *Tide Chandelier*, 2005, objects found washed up on seashores, 59 in diameter  
Michael Landy, *Art Bin*, 2010, into which Landy invited other artists to discard 'failed' artworks  
Maurizio Cattelan, *All*, 2010, installation of the artist's complete body of work at the Guggenheim Museum, NYC  
Nelson Leirner, *Selos*, 1999, collaged stamps on paper, 28x19 in  
Nari Ward, *Amazing Grace*, 1993

If the essence of the supercut is a *search* for tokens of a type or examples of a class, then why not Ed Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, or other photographic works with tighter groupings?

Images: Hong Hao, *My Things: Book Keeping*, 2006, digital print, 126 x 202 cm  
Ed Ruscha, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* [selected images], 1963  
Naoya Hatakeyama, *Untitled (Tokyo)*, 1988-2005, chromogenic prints, 79x230in  
Jan Freuchen, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 2009

Bernd and Hilla Becher's life work of making and grouping precisely-framed photographs of architectural variation feels exactly like a supercut to me, despite the fact that the images are their own. Or put another way, it seems wrong to suggest that their images could only "become" a supercut if they were appropriated and re-collaged by someone else.

Images: Bernd & Hilla Becher, *Water Towers*, 1965-97, gelatin silver prints, 68x95 in overall  
Bernd & Hilla Becher, *Water Towers*, 1988, black and white photographs, in 21 parts, 40x30cm each  
Bernd & Hilla Becher, *Coal Bunkers, Frontal Views*, 1986-93, nine silver prints, each approx. 41x31cm  
Bernd & Hilla Becher, *Water Towers*, 1972, nine silver prints  
Bernd & Hilla Becher, *Cooling Towers, Steel-Corrugated Concrete: Cologne, Ruhr District*, 1959-72, photographs, 60x40in  
Bernd & Hilla Becher, *Water Towers*, 1988, 9 gelatin silver prints, 16x12 in each  
Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Framework Houses, Industrial District of Siegen*, 1959–1973, 1993, 12 duotone offset prints, 25x20 in each  
Idris Khan, *Every... Bernd and Hilla Becher Gable Sided House*, 2004, digital chromogenic print, 134x100 cm

Moreover, if Warhol's collections of appropriated pop culture images, like these *Jackies*, seem squarely within the lineage of the supercut, then why not similar grids of *original* images, like these rhinestone paintings from Mickalene Thomas, or Byron Kim's landmark *Synecdoche* series?

Images: Andy Warhol, *Sixteen Jackies*, 1964, acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas, 80x64 in

Mickalene Thomas, *A-E-I-O-U and Sometimes Y*, 2009

Byron Kim, *Synecdoche*, 1991–present, oil and wax on wood, each panel 8x10 in (each panel is a portrait of a different person's skin color)

Returning to cinema, the formal difference between a video installation of close-ups and this montage of close-ups from Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1927) seems to be no more than a matter of spatial sequencing vs. temporal sequencing. One could easily re-arrange Gance's images into a spatial sequence, and as his montage accelerates to single-frame shots, the genetic bond between photography and cinema starts to re-assert itself.

Clip: *Napoleon* (Abel Gance, 1927)

Images: Kutluğ Ataman, *Mesopotamian Dramaturgies*, 2009, video installation

Marlene Dumas, *Black Drawings*, 1991-92, 112 mixed media on paper pieces, 25x18cm each

Tomoko Sawada, *ID400 (#201-300)*, 1998-2001, gelatin silver prints, 45x35in

Henrik Olesen, *Some Homosexual History, Profiles, Assumptions 'Nach Magnus Hirschfeld,'* 2008

Allan McCollum, *The SHAPES Project*, 2006, 7,056 unique digital prints, 4.25 x 5.5 in each

Sophie Calle, *The Sleepers*, 1979, 176 photographs and 23 texts, 152x402cm

Come to think of it, montages of facial close-ups not only predate *Napoleon* (1927), they appear in all sorts of contexts: avant-garde documentary, the flashback montage at the end of Eisenstein's *Old and New* (1929) that recaps Marfa's transformation, or, perhaps most notably, the photographer-in-the-park scene in *People on Sunday* (1930), a hybrid narrative and city symphony.

Clips: *Moskva* (Mikhail Kaufman and Ilya Kopalin, 1926)

*The Old and the New* (Grigoriy Aleksandrov, Sergei Eisenstein, 1929)

*People on Sunday* (Robert Siodmak, Edgar G. Ulmer, 1930)

And, as that hybridity underscores, the sheer bulk of overlapping and intermingling aesthetics in the 1920s makes *any* absolute classification difficult. Kracauer, we recall, grouped Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) within the cross-section genre that included Kalbus's film history montages; but scholars today more commonly bundle *Berlin* with the City Symphony, a genre that it helped to inaugurate.

Images: Ad for Ufa's Cross-Section Film series, 1928, reproduced in Cowan, Michael, "Cutting through the Archive: Querschnitt Montage and Images of the World in Weimar Visual Culture." *New German Critique* 120, Vol. 40, No. 3, Fall 2013, p. 5.

Clips: *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927)

*Regen* [Rain] (Joris Ivens, 1929)

*Montparnasse* (Eugène Deslaw, 1929)

Text on screen: city symphony

In many ways, the city symphony's multivalence encapsulates the cross-pollination of the avant-garde of the 1920's. As the authors of *The City Symphony Phenomenon* clarify, there were many strains of the avant-garde in the 1920's, often freely borrowing from each other, and though actualities had been around for a while, the notion of 'documentary' was only just emerging and its boundaries were still deeply contested. "In other words, there was a considerable amount of flux at precisely the time when the city symphony was taking shape. Combining elements from experimental, documentary, and narrative film, the city symphony form embodied this flux..." (Jacobs, Kinik, Hielscher, 32).

Text on screen: "In other words, there was a considerable amount of flux at precisely the time when the city symphony was taking shape. Combining elements from experimental, documentary, and narrative film, the city symphony form embodied this flux..."

Jacobs, Steven, Anthony Kinik, Eva Hielscher. *The City Symphony Phenomenon: Cinema, Art, and Urban Modernity Between the Wars*. Routledge: 2019, p. 32.

Thus, in Ivens's *Rain* (1929), we see links to the light rhythms and abstract movements of the absolute film, as well as to the montage of springtime melt in the agit-prop documentary *Turksib* (1929).

Clips: *H2O* (Ralph Steiner, 1929) [labelled "absolute film"]  
*Turksib* (Victor A. Turin, 1929) [labelled "documentary"]

Ruttman's cluster of machines whirring to life similarly finds echoes in the *same two genres*.

Clips: *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929)  
*Mechanical Principles* (Ralph Steiner, 1930)

These rhythmic machines-in-motion montages were a central aspect of the 1920's zeitgeist and the boundaries of genre were so permeable at the time that if I played one in isolation and asked if it came from a documentary, avant-garde, or a city symphony, what would you guess? Well, as it turns out, *this* clip comes from a mainstream narrative film – Josef von Sternberg's Paramount melodrama *The Docks of New York* (1928).

Clip: *The Docks of New York* (Josef von Sternberg, 1928)

In fact, here are three other narrative features just from 1928 that all include some sort of New York streets-and-cars montage.

Clips: *Speedy* (Ted Wilde, 1928)  
*Lonesome* (Paul Fejos, 1928)  
*The Crowd* (King Vidor, 1928)

Oh, and they all have a Coney Island montage, too.

Clips: three more clips of the same three films, showing the Coney Island montage

My point here is that the ubiquity of these forms of editing proves they were *never just a formal technique*. They are ways of thinking about organizing the world, approaches to making sense of existence. The city-symphony vision of industrial modernity may be best understood in [terms of] what Michel Foucault called an "episteme," a mode of knowledge that only becomes available at a certain moment in history, when the material conditions make it possible.

Text on screen: Episteme

A mode of knowledge that only becomes available at a certain moment in history, when the material conditions make it possible.

The Nineteenth Century saw an infusion of mechanical rhythms into everyday life that gradually supplanted organic temporality. It became necessary, therefore, to represent the city in a new way: as a

polyphony of concurrent actions, rather than just a single narrative line. The city symphony thus sometimes adopted a *listing aesthetic* to express that parallel repetition.

Remember that the prehistory of any form will involve *multiple* cultural series precisely because there are *multiple* defining features of any form.

Text on screen: A briskly-cut  
video list of  
appropriated  
moving images  
sharing some specific matching characteristic  
and offered as a representative cross-section of that characteristic.

Thus, in the various prehistories of the supercut, the important works often share all but one or all but two of the supercut's defining features. *October's* God and Country montage (1927) uses statues rather than moving images.

Text on screen: [the lines "appropriated" and "moving images" are crossed out]  
Clip: *October: Ten Days that Shook the World* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1927)

The march-of-the-movies montages are best-ofs instead of representative cross-sections.

Image: The March of the Movies 1927 *National Board of Review Magazine* II(3) March 1927, p. 3.  
Clip: *The March of Time*, Vol. 5 No. 12: The Movies March On! (1939)  
Text on screen: [the line "and offered as a representative cross-section of that characteristic" is crossed out]

If you remove the requirement of quick editing, then a parallel genre, that of the split-screen or grid video emerges.

Text on screen: [the line "A briskly-cut" is crossed out]  
Clips: *Plain Talk and Common Sense* (Jon Jost, 1987)  
*Sirens* (Tyler Adams, 2012) [35545875]

And this notably includes the work of Natalie Bookchin, Wreck and Salvage, and a number of other notable essayists and maybe some less notable ones, even including the present video.

Clips: *My Meds* (Natalie Bookchin, 2 Nov. 2009) [PzFhEdht5bo]  
*God Bless the USA* (Wreck & Salvage, 2008)  
*Indy Vinyl on The Clock (and the clock)* (Ian Garwood, 7 Feb. 2019) [315825426]  
*The nightmare videos of childrens' YouTube — and what's wrong with the internet today* (James Bridle, TED, 13 Jul. 2018) [v9EKV2nSU8w]  
*6 Hammers from Mahler's Symphony no. 6 'Tragic'* (amt253 (Max Tohline), 7 Jun. 2014) [4QLqwaQjYjl]  
*A Supercut of Supercuts: Aesthetics, Histories, Databases* (Max Tohline, 2020) – dancing supercuts grid from minute 3

And so, to return to our discussion of the city symphony; these might not look much like modern supercuts, but in reality, they only lack the dimension of *appropriation*.

Clips: *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927)

*Regen* [Rain] (Joris Ivens, 1929)  
*Montparnasse* (Eugène Deslaw, 1929)  
Text on screen: [the line “appropriated” is crossed out]

And so, another parallel mode emerges, in which the filmmaker applies database logic not to the archive, but their own footage. This appears perhaps most frequently in experimental or avant-garde cinema, from this short that Steiner and Van Dyke did as a sponsored film for the WPA to structural films of the 60's and 70's, and beyond.

Clips: *Hands* (Ralph Steiner & Willard Van Dyke, 1934)  
*Zorns Lemma* (Hollis Frampton, 1970)  
*In Order Not To Be Here* (Deborah Stratman, 2002)  
*Seeing Time* (Su-Chen Hung, 2007)

This parallel mode also appears in documentary, from the famed men's diving sequence in *Olympia* (1938) to the person-on-the-street are-you-happy interviews in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), and beyond. Some documentary shorts consist entirely of footage combined in this manner.

Clips: *Olympia, Part 2: Festival of Beauty* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1938)  
*Chronicle of a Summer* (Jean Rouch, Edgar Morin, 1961)  
*Sport, Sport, Sport* (Elem Klimov, 1970)  
*Sour Death Balls* (Jessica Yu, 1993)  
*Ten Meter Tower* [Hopptornet] (Axel Danielson, Maximilien van Aertryck, 2016)

In narrative, listing without appropriation appears early on in Hollywood montage sequences of the 1920s and 30s, where the motivation to efficiently express some large-scale or lengthy event while maximizing visual attraction led editors to collage “representative moments from a process” (28), as Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson put it.

Clips: *So This is Paris* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1926)  
*The Dance of Life* (John Cromwell, A. Edward Sutherland, 1929)  
*Say It with Songs* (Lloyd Bacon, 1929)  
Text on screen: “Typically, the montage sequence compresses a considerable length of time or space, traces a large-scale event, or selects representative moments from a process.”  
Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. Columbia UP, 1985, p. 28

According to them, the montage sequence emerged in Hollywood in the mid-1920s as an assimilation of German and Russian techniques of the period and emphasized extreme angles, canted camera, superimposition, split-screens, and a rapid blending of images.

Clips: *San Francisco* (W.S. Van Dyke, 1936)  
*Flying Down to Rio* (Thornton Freeland, 1933)  
*Melody Cruise* (Mark Sandrich, 1933)

Still, in all the examples of the classical Hollywood montage sequence mentioned by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, only one includes any kind of matching visual list.

Text on screen: [all clips but *Melody Cruise* (1933) disappear and the caption “These whistles →” points toward the montage of boat whistles playing in the clip of *Melody Cruise*]

But montage sequences were so plentiful in studio films of the 1930s and 40's – Don Siegel, for instance, created no fewer than *six* montage sequences for *The Adventures of Mark Twain* (1944) – they were so plentiful that forerunners to the supercut are bound to appear somewhere.

Clips: all six montage sequences created by Don Siegel for *The Adventures of Mark Twain* (Irving Rapper, 1944)

And, indeed, poring through the work of Hollywood's most famous montager, Slavko Vorkapich, reveals several eruptions of matching-listing. Consider the collage of drinkers from *Sins of the Fathers* (1928), or this series of revolutionaries pulling guns from hiding places in *Viva Villa* (1934).

Text on screen: montage sequences by Slavko Vorkapich  
Clips: *Sins of the Fathers* (Ludwig Berger, 1928)  
*Viva Villa* (Jack Conway, Howard Hawks, William Wellman, 1934)  
*Broadway Melody of 1938* (Roy Del Ruth, 1937)

In narrative cinema, the non-appropriative-supercut tends to appear thereafter in two ways: cases of *serial narrative ellipsis* and cases of *diegetic essayism*.

Text on screen: serial narrative ellipsis  
Diegetic essayism

By “serial narrative ellipsis,” I mean those moments in which the dramatic event itself involves sufficient repetition that all but the most central instant could be omitted without the audience getting lost. Consider, for instance, a scene of an audition or a tryout.

Clips: *Footlight Parade* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933)  
*I Love to Singa* (Tex Avery, 1936)

In the heyday of classical Hollywood narrativity, these scenes tended to play in “real time,” but decades later it became increasingly common and then, frankly, a matter of rote convention to use match cuts to chain together a series of brief moments from a string of auditions.

Clips: *Taking Off* (Milos Forman, 1971)  
*The Fabulous Baker Boys* (Steve Kloves, 1989)  
*All That Jazz* (Bob Fosse, 1979)  
*Sing* (Garth Jennings, 2016)  
Text on screen: serial narrative ellipsis

“Serial narrative ellipsis” could be applied to most any narrative situation that consists of similar actions recurring at periodic intervals, as long as the audience is able to infer what's been cut out. Examples include the famous breakfast table montage in *Citizen Kane* (1941), the bureaucratic runaround moment in *Ikiru* (1952), the head-shaving in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), or the montage of slaps in *Groundhog Day* (1993).

Clips: *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941)  
*Ikiru* (Akira Kurosawa, 1952)  
*Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987)

*Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993)

None of these rejects the grammar of classical narrativity, each just pushes that grammar to the point where the syntagmatic axis begins to resemble the paradigmatic axis. Since *Groundhog Day* (1993) is the story of a man reliving the same day, any repeated behavior from previous iterations of the day may be skipped without sacrificing legibility. Thus, classical narrativity, by means of perfectly logical and established ellipses, comes to resemble a supercut.

Image: illustration of syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes from Part 1, with a series of empty rectangles arranged along both the horizontal (syntagmatic) and vertical (paradigmatic) axes

Text on screen: (for a refresher on this, please skip back to ~11:09 in part 1)

Clip: *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993)

Images: A screenshot of each slap in the *Groundhog Day* slap montage appears in each successive rectangle on the syntagmatic axis

So, serial narrative ellipsis is one way narrative cinema has approached the database logic of the supercut; the other avenue is diegetic essayism. Diegetic essayism happens when the aesthetics of a film's editing momentarily departs from classical continuity conventions in order to illustrate a character's thoughts, which are often communicated in voice-over, like in a video essay.

Text on screen: diegetic essayism

Clips: *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994)

*Amélie* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001)

For instance, when Forrest Gump tells us about the wartime deaths of Lieutenant Dan's ancestors... [Clip audio, Forrest Gump, in voice-over: "Somebody in his family had fought and died in every single American war." Lt. Dan: "Goddamn it, kick some ass!" Soldier: "I'm on it, lieutenant." Lt. Dan: "Get on it!" Forrest (V.O.): "I guess you could say he had a lot to live up to." ...or when Amélie counts imagined orgasms.

...or when Amélie counts imagined orgasms.

[Clip audio: various orgasmic moans and cries; Amélie: "Fifteen!"]

In one extraordinary case, that of Agnès Varda's *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962), Cleo experiences a kind of "database-flashback," recalling all the moments from earlier in the day when someone else's gaze, even the imagined gaze of objects, confronted her. In this moment, a kind of search-query that re-sorts the preceding narrative, we discover something a traditional flashback never could've revealed – preponderant evidence of a systemic pattern of social surveillance that objectifies and polices Cleo every day, to the point of infecting her very sense of self.

Clip: *Cleo from 5 to 7* (Agnès Varda, 1962)

If database logic was extraordinary then, it's become commonplace now. So commonplace that tiny examples of it have even seeped into trailers, like this set of three quick shots from the trailer for *Captain Marvel* (2019).

Clip: *Marvel Studios' Captain Marvel - Official Trailer* (Marvel Entertainment, 18 Sep. 2018)

[Z1BCujX3pw8]

Images: 3 screenshots of Carol Danvers standing up

We could also trace the rise of the blooper reel as entertainment. To be fair, collections of flubbed takes or bits deemed too suggestive to air long circulated *within* the film and television industries... but sometime, apparently in the late 70's, they began to appear in certain films' end credits as a final opportunity for cathexis.

Clips: *You Bet Your Life* outtakes reel, ca. 1950-52  
*Hooper* (Hal Needham, 1978)  
*Being There* (Hal Ashby, 1979)

The mere existence of the outtake as an object suggests *potential* alternatives for any film – different takes, different casting, different stylistic decisions, and so on. In Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Salaam Cinema* (1995) and Kitty Green's *Casting JonBenet* (2017), a simulated casting process is the film's subject.

Clips: *Salaam Cinema* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1995)  
*Casting JonBenet* (Kitty Green, 2017)

Each displays a series of prospective actors to suggest a potentially limitless open set of possibilities. The most distilled version of this pseudo-documentary form is probably Kerry Tribe's *Untitled (Potential Terrorist)* (2002). In the early days of the War on Terror, the director published a nondescript casting call seeking people to audition to play a "terrorist." 29 actors showed up to audition and she filmed a Warhol-style screen test of each.

Clip: *Untitled (Potential Terrorist)* (Kerry Tribe, 2002)  
Images: newspaper casting notice for *Untitled (Potential Terrorist)*, Available at <http://www.kerrytribe.com/project/untitled-potential-terrorist/> [Accessed 5 December 2020]  
29 screenshots from *Untitled (Potential Terrorist)* (Kerry Tribe, 2002), one for each auditioner

The project asks questions like "What do you think of when you think of a 'terrorist'?" In film, that becomes a stylistic question, the same implicit question asked by Raymond Queneau in his experimental novel *Exercises in Style* (1947) – how does the meaning of this story change when I find a different way to tell it? And they each pose the question by supplying the audience with a database of possibilities.

Clip: hands turning pages of Queneau, Raymond. *Exercises in Style*, translated by Barbara Wright. New York, New Directions Books, 1981 [1947].

Of course, by mentioning Queneau, I invoke Oulipo and other examples of *potential literature* and database literature, and beyond that, further literary forerunners of the supercut, all of which are beyond the scope of this project. I will, however, mention, here at the closing of Part 2, that long before the 1920s, there were well-established literary traditions attempting to list either *favorite* examples of something, or *every* example of something.

Image: screenshot of the Wikipedia entry for "Oulipo," Available at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oulipo> [Accessed 6 December 2020].  
Text on screen: ["favorite examples" on top left, "every example" on top right]

The former, which belongs to the *archival* impulse to safeguard that which is considered special or strange or vulnerable, is likely the much older impulse, encompassing lists of "things that make the heart beat faster" in Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book* or lists of impressive creatures in the Book of Proverbs, chapter 30.

Text on screen: ["archival impulse" appears above "favorite examples"]

Images: *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*, edited and translated by Ivan Morris, Columbia UP, 1991 [ca. 1002], p. 51.

Book of Proverbs, chapter 30, The Words of Agur [ca. 5<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE or later], *Revised King James Version*, Oxford UP, 1885.

Every list of greatest movie insults or best film musicals carries on the tradition of these literary forebears. So do supercuts of sports highlights, famous photographs, and so on.

Image: screenshot of a popular videos from the WatchMojo YouTube channel, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/WatchMojo/videos> [Accessed 6 Jan. 2019]

Clips: ESPN Sportscenter's *'SportsCentury' Images of Our Century* montage (unknown editor, 1999)  
*100 Photographs: The Most Influential Images of All Time Trailer* (TIME, 1 Nov. 2016) [sIBX019oT2c]

The latter, the desire to list *every* example of something, belongs to the *database* impulse to *know* some aspect of existence exhaustively. Literary examples of this include concordances of the Bible or other sacred or important texts; encyclopedias with comprehensive lists of things; and then of course dictionaries, thesauruses, and scientific taxonomies.

Text on screen: [on the right side of the screen, "database impulse" appears above "every example"]

Images: *Nelson's Foundational Bible Concordance: King James Version*. Thomas Nelson, 2004, p. 127 [entry for the word "Cut"]

Ansyari, Isya. "World National Flags of Countries," available at <https://www.dreamstime.com/collection-set-illustrator-vector-flags-world-their-names-isolated-white-background-world-national-flags-image139636937> [Accessed 7 December 2020]

Spines of various volumes of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, illustration for article BBC 2020 Class to remove 'sexist' dictionary definitions for 'woman'. BBC 4 March 2020, Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-51738824> [Accessed 7 December 2020].

Cover of *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Thesaurus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Springfield, Massachusetts, Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2018.

Lopez, Alejandro et al. "The Tree of Life: Universal and Cultural Features of Folkbiological Taxonomies and Inductions." *Cognitive Psychology* 32(1997), pp. 251-295, p. 265. (<https://doi.org/10.1006/cogp.1997.0651>)

The desire to list *every* example of something *persists* in the supercut and even has recognizable subgenres, like the awards supercut, which presents a clip from every winner of a given prize; or the death reel, which compiles every onscreen death of a given actor; or the "every-F-bomb" video, which is self-explanatory and surprisingly pervasive. The Every genre can also be flipped to illustrate not an abundance, but an absence, such as Dylan Marron's compilations of every line of dialogue spoken by a person of color in a given film. The brief running times demonstrate industrial patterns of exclusion.

Clips: *The 'Best Picture' Show: The Final Image Oscar Montage* (Monte Patterson, 8 Mar. 2014) [88553323]

*Samuel L. Jackson Death Reel* (Jukka-Pekka Bohm, 4 Sep. 2012) [u\_c32Fncnr8]

Images: screenshot of YouTube search results for "every f word," available at [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=every+f+word](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=every+f+word) [Accessed 6 January 2019]

Screenshot of YouTube user Dylan Marron's uploaded videos, available at <https://www.youtube.com/user/dylanmarron/videos> [Accessed 9 June 2020]

So these two desires, the archival impulse and the database impulse, the desire to save or love particular things and the desire to compile or own everything, do not belong to either the avant-garde or the populist, nor do they exclusively serve analysis or cathexis. They reach across all of these sometimes-artificial boundaries because they represent different historical modes of making sense of experience.

The story of the supercut is the story of the rise of the database episteme. It is not the story of an editing technique making its way from the niche to the mass, but the story of how a certain way of thinking *with* and *about* culture sprung up in many places and slowly became commonplace. That's the story I hope I communicated in Part 2. In Part 3, I'll attempt to theorize the impetus to create supercuts. It's a desire that has for years consumed chunks of my life and the lives of many other creators, but where does it come from, and what does it represent on an ideological level?

Text on screen: The story of the supercut is the story of the rise of the database episteme  
Clips: *The Cutting Edge - The Magic of Editing* (Wendy Apple, 2004)  
*Down the Aisle: A Wedding Supercut* (Max Tohline, 14 Apr. 2014) [91925649]  
*Radetzky March Supercut (Vienna Phil New Year's compilation)* (amt253 [Max Tohline], 24 Dec.2015)  
[ewgUHC2cOdU]  
*Alfred Hitchcock's 39 Stairs [2 loops]* (Max Tohline, 25 Oct. 2017) [239872105]  
*Auto-H.S.S.* (Max Tohline, 1 Feb. 2019) [314974827]

Why do we watch these? Why do we do this?

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### PART 3. Databases

At the end of Part 2, I played a series of videos that compiled lists of 'every' example of something, like every Michael Bay explosion or every time Steve Buscemi's characters die in a movie.

Clips: *Every Single Michael Bay Explosion* (Jimmy Barr, 13 Jul. 2011) [qn\_HFEDNZ\_Q]  
*The Many Deaths of Steve Buscemi* (dondrapersayswhat, 23 Oct. 2011) [iMS4rqqiN20]

Each of these amounts to, in essence, a concordance with only one entry. But several filmmakers have created *complete* versions of the film-equivalent of a concordance. There's *Arst Arsw* (2014; I guess that's how you pronounce that), a remix of *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977) with every word of dialogue sorted into alphabetical order; and there's its ancestor, *Of Oz the Wizard* (2004), which does the same thing for *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

Clips: *ARST ARSW: Star Wars sorted alphabetically* (suckerpinch, 2 Jun. 2014) [5GFw-eEWXlc]  
*Of Oz the Wizard* (Matt Bucy, April 2004 (uploaded to Vimeo 2015)) [150423718]

Like a concordance, neither of these films seem designed to be "read" from beginning to end. Instead, the video implicitly invites the viewer to "look up" a particular word, like this one:  
[Clip audio, remixed lines from *The Wizard of Oz*, each word taken from a different clip: "Wiz wiz wiz wiz, Wiz wiz wiz wiz, Wiz wiz wiz wiz, Wiz wiz wiz wiz, Wizard wizard wizard! Wizard wizard wizard! Wizard—wizard. Wizard?"]

Other artists have gone further – back in 2001, Jennifer and Kevin McCoy’s *Every Shot, Every Episode* rigorously indexed 20 episodes of *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-1979), creating exhaustive video lists of generic elements of the cult series, like every zoom-in, every siren sound, every shot of a bartender. The project invites the viewer to pull a video disc from the shelf and watch it on a little screen. In various interviews, they argue that their aim was to materialize a database and make the activity of data retrieval tactile.

Clip: video documentation of *Every Shot, Every Episode* (Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, 2001), as installed at A.I.R. Gallery

Text on screen: \*cf. <https://vimeo.com/232544899>; <https://vimeo.com/220695649>

In 2010, Julian Palacz created *algorithmic search for love*, an interactive video installation that he called a “found footage film generator.” At a keyboard, the viewer may enter a word or a short phrase, and a program searches the subtitle files of several hundred movies and assembles, on the fly, a compilation of short clips centered on the timestamps where the search terms appear.

Clips: *Julian Palacz / Algorithmic Search for Love / Nominé Prix Cube 2013* (Le Cube, 13 May 2013) [sorRuMee9Wo]

*algorithmic search for love* (Julian Palacz, 2010) [documentation] [15805185]

[Clip audio, various films: “Where are you?” / “Wo bist du?” / “Où est tu?” / [unknown language] / “Où allez-vous?” / “Uh, where are you staying?”]

These concordance-films and database-film-installations are not the beginning of the database aesthetic in film, but rather, a confirmation of what the supercut had embodied all along. Prominent YouTube supercutters also made plenty of compilations of cliché movie lines presumably by searching thousands of subtitle files. Strung together, the results feel less like entertainment and more like the video equivalent of a Google search. Indeed, every time we use a search engine, we commission an algorithm to *make us* something like a supercut: a list of sites, images, or other results that match our search terms.

Text on screen: Every time we use a search engine,  
we commission an algorithm to make us something like a supercut.

Clips: *Get Down! - Supercut* (Dan Murrell for Screen Junkies, 21 Jan. 2014) [xKXr3BZ0EFg]

*GET OUT OF THERE!* (hh1edits, 4 May 2010) [\_W\_szJ6M-kM]

*555-SUPERCUT* (GoSwarmIt, 20 Oct. 2011) [TI1OAx9u1ok]

*Don't die on me - Supercut* (supercutonline, 2 Jun. 2014) [V\_kBdnziEFA]

[Clip audio: overlapping dialog from all clips playing at low volume]

In this way, the supercut echoes in video the paradigmatic act of our time: querying a database. As Lev Manovich famously wrote in *The Language of New Media*: “For better or worse, information access has become a key activity of the computer age. Therefore, *we need something that can be called ‘info-aesthetics’—a theoretical analysis of the aesthetics of information access as well as the creation of new media objects that ‘aestheticize’ information processing.*”

Clips: *I could tell you but I'd have to kill you – a Supercut* (Oscar Bartos, 6 Aug. 2010) [VuE\_jqYNi3c]

*“Let Her Go”: The Movie Cliché Supercut* (HuffPostMovieMashups, 30 Sep. 2014) [iR-s07VndGA]

*Supercut: There's a storm coming* (Jukka-Pekka Bohm, 21 Nov. 2012) [zTzh8uhnIqc]

*We've Got Company! from The Guy Bauer Half Hour* (Guy Bauer, 12 Apr. 2010) [xMANB6YnshU]

Text on screen: “For better or worse, information access has become a key activity of the computer age. Therefore, *we need something that can be called ‘info-aesthetics’—a theoretical analysis of the aesthetics of information access as well as the creation of new media objects that ‘aestheticize’ information processing.* In an age when all design has become ‘information design,’ and, to paraphrase the title of the famous book by the architectural historian Sigfried Giedion, ‘the search engine takes command,’ information access is no longer just a key form of work but also a new key category of culture. Accordingly, it demands that we deal with it theoretically, aesthetically, and symbolically.”

Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001, p. 217

[Clip audio stops]

[Repeating] “New media objects that ‘aestheticize’ information processing.” That’s the supercut. And I say this without metaphor: the activity of cobbling together a supercut, whether we employ the aid of a subtitle database or just rely on our own memory, is conceptually equivalent to a Google search. The only difference being that in the case of a supercut, humans must do the work of identifying which images satisfy the parameters of the search, whereas on Google computers fulfill that task automatically.

Clips: *Sit Down and Shut Up: The Supercut* (dondrapersayswhat, 4 Dec. 2011) [VUn07dB645c]

“You Just Don’t Get It, Do You?”: *A Montage of Cinema’s Worst Writing Cliche* (Jeff Smith, 5 May 2012) [rzoPSV4ua94]

Before I offer my thesis for this part of the essay, I want to take a moment to pause and re-orient ourselves to the physical world. There’s a poem by Walt Whitman that repeats the line, “There was a child went forth every day. And the first object he look’d upon, that object he became.”

Image: Whitman, Walt. “There Was a Child Went Forth” in *Leaves of Grass*, 1871 edition, as scanned by The Walt Whitman Archive, Available at <https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1871/poems/113> [Accessed 7 December 2020].

It’s a line that’s been with me since high school, and every time I think about it, I’m kind of devastated by how well it states the relationship between ideology and the environment. And so with that line in mind, I’m going to black out the screen for a moment. Wherever you are, just take a moment to stop looking at the screen, and look around. The screen, of course, is an object, connected to a phone or to a computer, or perhaps a technology that doesn’t exist in 2020 when I’m making this. But what other objects do you see? Around me as I write this, I see books, with page numbers, indices, bibliographic data, bar codes. I see some food in mass-printed packaging bearing detailed nutrition data, and also a barcode. I have an account statement for my Roth IRA, with earnings breakdowns and analysis; some medications covered in more data; a shelf of DVDs and blu-rays, art that’s literally been converted into data. The lightbulb above me is connected to a complex electrical grid that enumerates exactly how much power I use and sends me a bill to the cent. I pay with a credit card on which I regrettably carry some debt, and that debt fits into an even more complex series of financial models that trade my debt, aggregated with other people’s debt, while others make bets on the future value of that pile of debt, and—[voice fades out near the end]

If I asked you why we have the inventions and the infrastructure that we have, the commonsense answer might say that technological development is driven by human desire. We want something, and so we invent a way of doing it.

Text on screen: [an arrow pointing from the word “desire” toward the word “technology”]

But this is a one-sided account. The objects we make also have an ideological effect: by framing how we see and interact with the world and the limits of what is possible in it, technologies condition and inspire human desire.

Text on screen: [another arrow appears, this time pointing from “technology” toward “desire”]

As the information age dawned, new technologies for the organization and management of information conditioned us to think of the world as *made of* information. This nascent form of database-thinking, of thinking of everything as data, is a new episteme – that is, a new system of thought. So if you walk away from this video with anything, I hope it’s a sense of how an episteme permeates through every stratum of a culture. Just as the logic of mass production goes well beyond factory walls, the database isn't confined to hard drives. It's everywhere.

Text on screen: Episteme: A paradigm of knowledge that defines the boundaries of what is thinkable at a given moment in history

Images: photo of nutrition facts and barcode for a package of raisins

Photo of the index of a book

Screenshot of Google Books Ngram Viewer for the words “truth, knowledge, data, information.” Available at [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=truth%2Cknowledge%2Cdata%2Cinformation&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2000&corpus=26&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=truth%2Cknowledge%2Cdata%2Cinformation&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=26&smoothing=3) [Accessed 7 December 2020]

Photo of some DVD and Blu-ray spines on a shelf

Screenshot of IMDb User Ratings for the film *The African Queen* (1951), Available at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0043265/ratings>

Screenshot of IMDb User Ratings for the TV show *Queen Sono* (2020), Available at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9426290/ratings>

Screenshot of a Google Maps route overview for a trip from DataBank Data Centers in Bluffdale, UT, to the National Archives Museum in Washington, D.C., Available at <https://www.google.com/maps/dir/DataBank+Data+Centers,+14944+Pony+Express+Rd,+Bluffdale,+UT+84065/National+Archives+Museum,+Constitution+Avenue+Northwest,+Washington,+DC/@40.5691884,-111.980213,11z/data=!4m14!4m13!1m5!1m1!1s0x8752811fcae8732d:0x89e857ad71f15c70!2m2!1d-111.904533!2d40.480032!1m5!1m1!1s0x89b7b79adcbc14d1:0x17b51a59f16166f1!2m2!1d-77.022939!2d38.892559!3e0>

Photograph of a light bulb

Photograph of a surveillance feed at a WalMart self-checkout station

And so, as I’ve said before, the supercut isn't just a mode of editing; it's a mode of thinking expressed by a mode of editing.

Text on screen: The supercut isn't just a mode of editing; it's a mode of thinking expressed by a mode of editing.

Keeping that in mind, and keeping in mind the histories of the supercut from Part 2, I wish to make two claims here in Part 3:

Number 1; that the rise of the supercut is a symptom of a deep epistemic shift that cuts across many layers of culture, from surveillance to finance to search engines to the aesthetics of YouTube videos.

Images: The March of the Movies 1927 *National Board of Review Magazine* II(3) March 1927, p. 3.

Photograph of Henny Porten seated opposite Oskar Kalbus, from *Bonte*, A 2002 Happy End für eine Filmbibliothek? Die Filmbibliothek Kalbus in der Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg. In: *Theke*. Informationsblatt der Mitarbeiterinnen und Mitarbeiter im Bibliothekssystem, (2002), pp. 27-32.

Clips: *The Cruise of the Jasper B.* (James W. Horne, 1926)  
*Rien que les heures* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1926)  
*So This is Paris* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1926)  
*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927)  
*October: Ten Days that Shook the World* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1927)  
*Napoleon* (Abel Gance, 1927)  
*Bluebottles* (Ivor Montagu, 1928)  
*Lonesome* (Paul Fejos, 1928)  
*Sins of the Fathers* (Ludwig Berger, 1928)  
*Melody of the World* (Walter Ruttmann, 1929)  
*The Dance of Life* (John Cromwell, A. Edward Sutherland, 1929)  
*Regen* [Rain] (Joris Ivens, 1929)  
*People on Sunday* (Robert Siodmak, Edgar G. Ulmer, 1930)  
*Turksib* (Victor A. Turin, 1929)

Broadly speaking, a new system of knowledge and power – that of the database – engulfed and replaced an older system of knowledge, the archive.

Text on screen: 1) a new system of knowledge & power (*or episteme*) – that of the database – engulfed and replaced an older system of knowledge, the archive.

Clips: *Duck Soup* (Leo McCarey, 1933)  
*Hands* (Ralph Steiner & Willard Van Dyke, 1934)  
*Rose Hobart* (Joseph Cornell, 1936)  
*Olympia, Part 2: Festival of Beauty* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1938)

But 2) This shift took place gradually, with the episteme of the database achieving its ascendancy *ideologically* long before it was fully installed *infrastructurally*. The supercut phenomenon *especially* embodies the ideological permeation of the database episteme, in the sense that makers of supercuts *simulate* computer database queries on material that computers cannot yet search through.

Text on screen: 2) The supercut phenomenon embodies the ideological permeation of the database episteme, in the sense that makers of supercuts simulate computer database queries on material that computers cannot yet search through.

Clips: *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941)  
*Bop-Scotch* (Jordan Belson, 1952)  
*Ikiru* (Akira Kurosawa, 1952)  
*The Banner of Youth* (Walerian Borowczyk, Jan Lenica, 1957)  
*Cowboy and 'Indian' Film* (Raphael Montañez Ortíz, 1958)  
*A Movie* (Bruce Conner, 1958)  
*Wail* (Jeff Keen, 1960)  
*Knut Rockne: All American* (Lloyd Bacon, 1940) [montage by Don Siegel]  
*Cleo from 5 to 7* (Agnès Varda, 1962)

That is to say, every compiler of a supercut essentially performs computer-tasks that can't yet be done by computers.

Text on screen: 2) The supercut phenomenon embodies the ideological permeation of the database episteme, in the sense that every compiler of a supercut essential performs computer-tasks that can't yet be done by computers.

Image: Andy Warhol, *Sixteen Jackies*, 1964, acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas, 80x64 in

Clips: *Beginning* (Artavazd Peleshian, 1967)

*3000 Years of Art* (Dan McLaughlin, 1968)

*Taking Off* (Milos Forman, 1971)

*Ways of Seeing*, Ep. 2, Women in Art (John Berger, Michael Dibb, 1972)

The problem with part two of this essay was that even if it called itself "Histories," it was more than anything a set of aesthetic chronologies. The difference is that a chronology just lines things up in date order, whereas *history*, properly conducted, offers a material account of the forces that brought things into being.

Text on screen: chronology vs. history

Image: Annette Messager, *Voluntary Tortures*, 1972, 86 gelatin silver prints, dimensions variable

Clips: *That's Entertainment!* (Jack Haley, Jr., 1974)

*Killing Us Softly* (Margaret Lazarus, Renner Wunderlich, 1979)

*Being There* (Hal Ashby, 1979)

*Hollywood*, Ep. 5 'Hazards of the Game' (Kevin Brownlow, David Gill, 1980)

*The Atomic Café* (Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty, Pierce Rafferty, 1982)

*Precious Images* (Chuck Workman, 1986) [the version shown here is the mid-90's re-release]

So if I want to offer even a fragmentary account of the database episteme's emergence through the supercut, I have to remedy that here in part 3.

Text on screen: Part 3: Databases [table of contents]

1:20:26 Concordance films

1:22:30 The Google search as supercut

1:23:53 "There Was a Child Went Forth"

1:26:21 Thesis and contents

1:27:28 Replacing chronology with history

1:28:21 Database vs. narrative

1:30:00 Database vs. archive

1:30:33 From archive to database

1:30:43 Prerequisites of the supercut

1:32:46 What took so long? (TV news)

1:41:46 Archives vs. Databases

1:45:05 Walter Benjamin

1:46:01 Converting to data

1:46:44 Creating data

1:47:32 Examples:

1:47:49 The movie-business documentary

1:50:27 Narrower, shorter, and more

1:52:12 Alan Berliner

1:55:13 Kiss, kiss, kiss

1:56:42 Database as ideology and power

1:57:59 Technology and ideology: Marx

1:59:20 Mechanical Turks & Potemkin AI

2:02:35 My search vs. CBVR

2:04:24 Warnings and Myths

2:07:57 Final thoughts for artists

Image: Tony Cragg, *Minster*, 1987-90, car parts, various dimensions  
Clips: *You Have Beautiful Stairs, You Know* (Agnès Varda, 1986)  
*Ethnic Notions* (Marlon Riggs, 1987)  
*The Family Album* (Alan Berliner, 1988)

So to begin, no cultural form ever appears from nowhere; it always arises in response to or within a matrix of competing modes of power, or ideological frameworks or, simply, other ways of doing things. So I must first define the database episteme *in relation to something...* just like in part one, where I argued that a word like “green” only has meaning in relation to other words.

Text on screen: What did the database episteme emerge *in relation to*?

Image: Bernd & Hilla Becher, *Water Towers*, 1988, black and white photographs, in 21 parts, 40x30cm each

Clips: *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988)  
*Home Stories* (Matthias Müller, 1990-91)  
*Oh Boy* (Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out, 1990)  
*Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (Mark Rappaport, 1992)  
*Sour Death Balls* (Jessica Yu, 1993)  
*America's Funniest Home Videos* (Season 5, Ep. 2, 1993)  
*200 Mouths to Feed* (Claude Closky, 1994)  
*Telephones* (Christian Marclay, 1995)  
*Seinfeld*, S6E14: The Highlights of a Hundred (ed. Janet Ashikaga, 1995)  
*Gringo in Mañanaland* (DeeDee Halleck, 1995)

Now, other scholars have already mentioned that the supercut is a database operation, and in doing this they always seem to invoke Manovich. In Manovich's account of database-aesthetics in new media, he usually contrasts the database with *narrative*. In doing so, he explicitly describes their relationship as equivalent to the relationship between the paradigmatic axis and the syntagmatic axis in language.

Images: Title and excerpt of p. 10 from Meneghelli, Donata. “Just Another Kiss: Narrative and Database in Fan Vidding 2.0.” *Global Media Journal: Australian Edition* Vol. 11 Issue 1 (2017), pp. 1-14

Cover and excerpt from Russell, Catherine. *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices*. Durham, Duke UP, 2018.

Title and first paragraph of Cowan, Michael, “Cutting through the Archive: Querschnitt Montage and Images of the World in Weimar Visual Culture.” *New German Critique* 120, Vol. 40, No. 3, Fall 2013, pp. 1-40.

Text on screen: [the intersecting axes labeled “Syntagmatic Structures” (on the horizontal) and “Paradigmatic Structures” re-appear, with “Syntagmatic Structures” further labeled “(the narrative axis)” and “Paradigmatic Structures” labeled “(the database axis).”]

At one point, to argue for the rise of the database over narrative, Manovich offers the example of menus on media editing software, uh, which present creative options as paradigmatic lists. He writes, “Database (the paradigm) is given material existence, while narrative (the syntagm) is dematerialized” (231).

Text on screen: “Database (the paradigm) is given material existence, while narrative (the syntagm) is dematerialized.”

Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001, p. 231.

Image: screen grab of *A Supercut of Supercuts* being edited in Adobe Premiere, zoomed to show “Video Transitions” menu.

Now, on this point, I might not go as far as Manovich does, since Adobe Premiere and other software like it aren't replacing narrative, any more than a palette replaces a painting or a wood shop replaces a chair. But there's no doubt that in the context of cinema, database aesthetics have indeed powerfully confronted and infused themselves into narrative aesthetics. There's the anthology film, the musical revue, and the database or hyperlink narrative.

Images: Posters for the films *Dead of Night* (Alberto Cavalcanti, Charles Crichton, Basil Drearden, Robert Hamer, 1945), *Ro.Go.Pa.G* (Roberto Rossellini, Jean-Luc Godard, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Ugo Gregoretti, 1963), *Lumière and Company* (40 directors, 1995), *Paris, je t'aime* (22 directors, 2006), *The Hollywood Revue of 1929* (Charles Reisner, 1929), *Paramount on Parade* (21 directors, 1930), *Make Mine Music!* (Robert Cormack, Clyde Geronimi, Jack Kinney, Hamilton Luske, Joshua Meador, 1946), *The Secret Policeman's Ball* (Roger Graef, 1979), *Grand Hotel* (Edmund Goulding, 1932), *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975), *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), and *Babel* (Alejandro G. Iñárritu, 2006)

But since the contents of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes are definitionally fixed *with respect to each other*, this collision can only result in database-slash-narrative hybrids. And more importantly for this project, the aesthetics of database narratives and omnibus films have almost nothing to do with a generally *non-narrative* form like the supercut, and even less to do with where the supercut came from.

Text on screen: What did the database episteme emerge *in relation* to?

Thus, the answer to this question, at least as far as the supercut is concerned, must lie in a different confrontation, one located entirely within the paradigmatic axis.

Text on screen: [the horizontal axis, labeled "Syntagmatic Structures," disappears, leaving only the vertical axis, "Paradigmatic Structures"]

That is to say, the supercut arose in opposition to a different system of paradigmatic organization, another style of collecting and sorting things. As it turns out, Manovich gestures in this direction at the beginning of his discussion of the database in *The Language of New Media*.

Text on screen: "A computer database is quite different from a traditional collection of documents: It allows one to quickly access, sort, and reorganize millions of records; it can contain different media types, and it assumes multiple indexing of data, since each record besides the data itself contains a number of fields with user-defined values.

"Today, in accordance with the transcoding principle, these two computer-based forms migrate back into culture at large, both literally and conceptually. A library, a museum—in fact, any large collection of cultural data—is replaced by a computer database."

Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001, p. 214.

Here, he speaks of a collection of documents, a library, a museum: in other words, an archive. Though Manovich does not much consider the differences between the episteme of the archive and the episteme of the database, the rise of the supercut depends on this ideological shift.

To demonstrate what I mean, I'd like you to consider what's *necessary* to make a supercut. That is to say, what are the social *prerequisites* of the supercut?

Text on screen: The Social Prerequisites of the Supercut

As I see it, three things are needed. First, what I call sufficient tropic repetition – that is, enough time must have elapsed for film history to build up enough shots of whatever the [subject of the] supercut is [that is, whatever trope it catalogs]. Since some screen events are more common than others, the necessary time varies, but needless to say some supercuts would have been possible after just the first decade of cinema. Here’s a supercut of Méliès explosions that I threw together to offer an example of a supercut that would’ve been possible by 1905.

Text on screen: 1. Sufficient Tropic Repetition  
Clips: *The Man with the Rubber Head* (Georges Méliès, 1901)  
*Bob Kick the Mischievous Kid* (Georges Méliès, 1903)  
*The Cook in Trouble* (Georges Méliès, 1904)  
*The Mermaid* (Georges Méliès, 1904)  
*Jupiter’s Thunderballs* (Georges Méliès, 1903)  
*An Adventurous Automobile Trip* (Georges Méliès, 1905)  
*Fat and Lean Wrestling Match* (Georges Méliès, 1900)  
*A Crazy Composer* (Georges Méliès, 1905)  
*An Adventurous Automobile Trip* (Georges Méliès, 1905)  
*A Trip to the Moon* (Georges Méliès, 1902)  
*The Infernal Cauldron* (Georges Méliès, 1903)  
*The Famous Box Trick* (Georges Méliès, 1898)

The second requirement is access to that footage. In the age of digital media, this access has become much more widespread, allowing the supercut to proliferate as a form. The correlate of this is that important waypoints on the genealogy of the supercut often involved extra-ordinary access, as in the case of Esfir Shub, Kandy Fong, Dara Birnbaum, Chuck Workman, and others.

Text on screen: 2. Access

“When Esfir Shub began work on the film that would become the first part in the trilogy of Soviet history... she realized that hardly any film documentation of the revolution existed in the Soviet Union. ... Shub started tracking down and collecting film stock in various places in the Soviet Union, but also pushed Sovkino to acquire material abroad. The Russian trade organization Amtorg was even asked to acquire film stock in the United States for Shub, material that had been sent there as part of the workers’ international relief. According to legend, Shub viewed about one million metres of film for the trilogy – only 6,000 metres were used, less than one percent. In her autobiography she reports on her research trips in words that echo the archivist’s labour of unearthing forgotten treasures.”

Hagener, Malte. *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919-1939*. Amsterdam UP, 2007. p. 175.

“John [Fong] had three cigar boxes filled with little pieces of film that had been edited from the TV show itself, because the TV show back then was all shot on film.”

Kandy Fong, telling Francesca Coppa where the unusual outtake material for the first fanvid came from. Coppa, F 2014 Interview with Kandy Fong. In Rehak, B (ed.) *Materiality and Object-Oriented Fandom*, special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* (16). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0535>. Available at: <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/535/431> [Last accessed 4 December 2020].

“I begged young guys [in the industry] that liked me at that time, ... ‘Can you get me that image out?’ It was like getting dope out of a place... like stealing drugs or something like that.”

Dara Birnbaum giving an artist talk at: Dara Birnbaum – Installation & Video Artist (School of Visual Arts, 28 Oct. 2015) [[\\_oNSitc1CPU](#)]

“The Directors Guild was having a seventy-fifth anniversary, and they wanted to do a film. I’d been active in the Directors Guild, in what they call ‘Special Projects,’ and I had made two documentaries for them... I had the confidence to say, ‘Let’s not do a documentary for the Directors Guild anniversary; let’s do a little trailer of everything that the members of the guild have done.’”

Chuck Workman, discussing the genesis of *Precious Images* in an interview with Scott MacDonald, in MacDonald, Scott. *A Critical Cinema 4: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2005, p. 238.

The third and final requirement is a certain attitude toward the footage. To make a supercut, the editor must think of that footage less as *art* preserved in an archive, and more as a *collection of data* that can be queried and sorted to reveal patterns. Now, this ought to have been easy – after all, there was never a shortage of intentional repetition on Hollywood’s part – indeed, mass-produced sameness was always their business model. On top of that, concordances had existed for centuries and compilation editing appeared around 1900. So where was the supercut?

Text on screen: 3. A Certain Attitude toward Images  
Clip: *Artist* (Tracey Moffatt, Gary Hillberg, 1999)

Bazin asked a similar question in *What is Cinema?* when he wondered why the motion toys of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century didn’t appear much earlier. After all, “all the prerequisites had been assembled ... for a long time.”

Clip: *Film Before Film* (Werner Nekes, 1986)

Text on screen: “The synthesis of simple movements studied scientifically by Plateau had no need to wait upon the industrial and economic developments of the nineteenth century. As Sadoul correctly points out, nothing had stood in the way, from antiquity, of the manufacture of a phenakistoscope or a zootrope [sic]. ... [W]e must here explain, on the other hand, how it was that the invention took so long to emerge, since all the prerequisites had been assembled and the persistence of the image on the retina had been known for a long time.”

Bazin, Andre. “The Myth of Total Cinema.” In *What is Cinema?, Vol. 1*, edited and translated by Hugh Gray. Berkeley: U of California P, 2005 [1967], pp. 18-9.

Why don’t technological possibility and innovation proceed in synchrony? To answer this question for the supercut, let’s examine a single medium, a medium in which the supercut now flourishes: television news. When did supercuts emerge there?

Text on screen: What took the supercut so long?  
A side trip through TV news

\*my apologies for the significant national bias of this section; I encourage those with knowledge of broadcast history elsewhere to amend or correct my analysis here.

Now, in network TV news, editors had ready access to the archive and reason to use it. But despite these resources, the supercut did not develop as a mainstay of TV journalism until well after the form had established itself elsewhere. Some of this surely has to do with the difficulty of editing on video tape. After all, as editing technologies changed, so did aesthetics.

Clips: *CBS Evening News* broadcast for 31 Jul. 1968  
*CBS Evening News* broadcast for 30 Jul. 2018

[Clip audio: News anchor 1: “There are now two wrongful death lawsuits filed in the deadly duck boat crash in Missouri.” Man at microphone: “We hope that we will drive the death-trap duck boats out of business.” News anchor 2: “CBS’s Board of Directors is meeting today—” News anchor 3: “—to talk about the fate of CEO Les Moonves—” News anchor 2: “—after allegations of sexual misconduct.”]

That said, nightly news broadcasts since at least the 1960s used file footage regularly, but they did not produce supercuts with it. Instead, they made what we might call the “archival ancestors” of the supercut. Here are clips from the nightly news broadcasts of the three major American networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS, from three different decades, each using a very brief list of archival clips to situate a contemporary news item into a broader pattern.

Clips: *CBS Evening News*, 25 Dec. 1978 [segment on cults]  
*ABC World News Tonight*, 23 May 1983 [segment on entertainers in politics]  
*NBC Nightly News*, 31 Oct. 1992 [segment on the protest vote]

[Clip audio: ABC News anchor: “Franklin D. Roosevelt liked to be seen with Will Rogers, even though Rogers poked fun at him, because he was the most popular entertainer of his time. Jack Kennedy did not mind when Marilyn Monroe sang Happy Birthday to him at Madison Square Garden. Richard Nixon let Sammy Davis, Jr., give him a big hug at the 1972 Republican convention.”]  
In all cases, the act of editing does not discover or reveal a pattern; rather, the footage merely illustrates a pattern that was already known and probably could’ve been described just as easily without the footage.

Archive-footage *documentaries* of the mid-century, despite having more time to research and cut than nightly news broadcasts, also did not embrace the supercut format, even when they discovered a pattern that could’ve easily been illustrated with one. Emile de Antonio’s *Point of Order* (1963), an examination of the McCarthy Hearings, calls attention to McCarthy’s abuse of parliamentary procedure, in particular the *point of order*, to turn the hearings into a political circus.

Clip: *Point of Order* (Emile de Antonio, 1963)

[Clip audio: [gavel banging throughout, general hubbub] McCarthy: “Now, Mr. Chairman, do I – do I have the floor or do I not?” Symington: “The counsel says it’s not a point of order.” McCarthy: “Oh, be quiet. Mr. Chairman—” Symington: “I haven’t the slightest intention of being quiet.” McCarthy: “Mr. Chairman, do I have the floor?” Symington: “The counsel is running this committee and you’re not running it.” McCarthy: “Mr. Chairman, do I have the floor? Mr. Chairman—” Mundt: “The chair has the floor and at the moment is endeavoring to determine whether or not Senator McCarthy is speaking to a point of order.” McCarthy: “Mr. Chairman—” Mundt: “You may state your point of order, and then speak to it.” McCarthy: “Now, Mr. Chairman...”]

Note, however, that he does not cut these clips down as a modern supercutter might.

Clip: example recut of *Point of Order* plays alongside de Antonio’s film

[Clip Audio: Various speakers: “Point of order” / “point of order” / “point of order” / “I raised the point of order” / “state your point of order” / “a proper point of order” / “Mr. Welch did not make a point of order” / “under the guise of a point of order” / “Point of order?” / “Point of order, Mr. Welch?” / “My point of order is this:” / “...McCarthy have a point of order?” / “I don’t know what it is, but it’s a point of something...”]

Even later documentaries that specifically concerned media representation, like *Manufacturing Consent* (1992) and Peter Watkins’s *The Media Project* (1991), still did not employ supercuts to support their

claims. They each opted instead for an old-fashioned revue of newspaper headlines, quite like those that appeared in classical Hollywood films and even city symphonies. And so, the archival episteme held on.

Clips: *Manufacturing Consent* (Mark Achbar, Peter Wintonick, 1992)  
*The Media Project* (Peter Watkins, 1991)  
*Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941)  
*Knut Rockne: All American* (Lloyd Bacon, 1940) [montage by Don Siegel]  
*Lisbôa Cronica Anedótica* (José Leitão de Barros, 1930)  
*São Paulo, a Metropolitan Symphony* (Adalberto Kemeny, Rudolpho Rex Lustig, 1929)

It thus fell to later creators to discover discursive patterns in political soundbytes and collage them into something like a supercut. Brian Springer's 1995 project *Spin* scrutinized hundreds of hours of unencrypted satellite news feeds from the 1992 American presidential campaign to reveal techniques of media manipulation, unguarded hot-mic moments, and, for our purposes, Barbara Bush repeating this catch-phrase during a series of interviews with local TV stations.

Clip: *Spin* (Brian Springer, 1995)

[Clip audio, Barbara Bush: "Remember that every single man, woman, and child in the state of South Carolina awakens to a freer, safer world because of George Bush." / Production assistant: "WIS, do you hear us in Washington?" / Barbara Bush: "I would remind people that every single morning we all awaken to a safer, freer world because of George Bush." / Production assistant: "WCB, do you hear us in Washington?" / Barbara Bush: "Nicole, I would remind you and the people of Florence that all of us awaken, every single day, to a freer, safer world because of George Bush."]

This moment of forensics points in a direct line to Conan O'Brien's segments unmasking the activities of affiliate services like CBS Newspath, which distribute canned scripts to supposedly "local" TV news.

Text on screen [footnote]: Cf: Farhi, Paul. "A local TV trend: And now, the identical news." *The Washington Post*, November 27, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-local-tv-trend-and-now-the-identical-news/2012/11/27/9369a308-38bd-11e2-8a97-363b0f9a0ab3\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-local-tv-trend-and-now-the-identical-news/2012/11/27/9369a308-38bd-11e2-8a97-363b0f9a0ab3_story.html).

Note also: this segment aired 7 years before the Deadspin exposé of Sinclair Media Group mentioned in the introduction

Clip: *Media Reacts To Conan's Same-Sex Wedding News* (TeamCoco, 3 Nov. 2011) [GME5nq\_oSR4]

[Clip audio, various news anchors: "Talk show host Conan O'Brien may be about to push the envelope on late night television." / "Conan O'Brien may be able [sic] to push the envelope on late night television." / "Conan O'Brien may be about to push the envelope on late night television." / "Conan O'Brien may be about to push the envelope on late night television." / "Conan O'Brien may be about to push the envelope on his late night television." / "Conan O'Brien may be about to push ...."]

Similarly, we may also draw a direct line from Aaron Valdez's condensed version of one of Bill Clinton's State of the Union addresses...

Clip: *States of the Union - Bill Clinton* (Aaron Valdez, 1997)

[Clip audio, Bill Clinton [each number is a different clip]: "Twenty-seven, seven-hundred, twenty, twenty-first, five, third, thirty-five, twenty-first, three hundred fifty seven billion, ten, three, six, eleven..."]

...to this more whimsical piece on Trump's exaggerations.

Clip: *Donald Trump Counts To The Biggest Number Ever* (VICE News, 5 Feb. 2018) [a9jWco4xw-U]

[Clip audio, Donald Trump: "The number is through the roof" / "The numbers are astronomical" / "Ever-growing numbers" / "Numbers that you've never seen before" / "Numbers that nobody has ever seen" / "Numbers that you wouldn't even think are believable..."]

Just past the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, media montages became cornerstones of critical or agit-prop documentaries, for instance:

Clip: *The Corporation* (Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbott, 2003)

[Clip audio: News pundit 1: "This is just a few bad apples" / News pundit 2: "It's not just a few bad apples." / Congressman: "We've gotta get rid of the bad apples. You can start with Tyco." / News pundit 3: "Bad apples" / Congressman: "We know all about WorldCom." / News pundit 4: "Bad apples" / Congressman: "Xerox corporation..."]

Clip: *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004)

[Clip audio: Military choir singing "America the Beautiful;" Michael Moore, in V.O.: "Fortunately we have an independent media in this country who would tell us the truth." / Fox News reporter Shepard Smith: "The rallying around the president, around the flag, and around the troops clearly has begun." / Member of the military, on Fox News: "And we're gonna win!" / Fox News reporter: "[You] really have to be with the troops to understand that kind of adrenaline rush that they get." / NBC News anchor Katie Couric: "I just want you to know, I think Navy Seals rock." / Field reporter, off screen: "The pictures you're seeing are absolutely phenomenal." / CBS News anchor Dan Rather: "When my country is at war, uh, I want, uh, my country to win."]

Soon, this aesthetic spread to the documentary form more generally, to the point where now it appears regardless of whether its evidentiary muscle is required.

Clip: *Won't You Be My Neighbor* (Morgan Neville, 2018)

Still, as Tom McCormack argues, no single voice did more to popularize the political-soundbyte supercut than Jon Stewart on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*. In 2003, when he presented a segment called "Bush v. Bush," the convention of playing a series of short clips had not yet coalesced; so instead, he contextualized the clips within the conceit of a fake interview.

Text on screen: McCormack, Tom. "Compilation Nation: The history and the rise of the supercut." <http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/compilation-nation-20110425>, April 25, 2011.

Clip: *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, 28 Apr. 2003 ["Bush v. Bush" segment]

[Clip audio: Jon Stewart: "Why is the United States of America using its power to change governments in foreign countries?" / President George W. Bush, to the U.N.: "We must stand up for our security, and for the permanent rights and the hopes of mankind. The United States of America will make that stand." / Jon Stewart: "Well, certainly, that represents a bold new doctrine in foreign policy, Mr. President.

Governor Bush, do you agree with that?" / Texas Governor George W. Bush: "Yeah, I'm not so sure that the role of the United States is to go around the world and say, 'This is the way it's gotta be.'" / [Audience laughing, cheering, clapping] Jon Stewart: "All right, well that's interesting..."

But this soon changed. Over the next few years, television closed-captioning archive-and-search tools like Podscope and SnapStream, as well as others, made broadcasts text-searchable, dramatically streamlining the process of compiling a political soundbyte supercut...

Text on screen [footnote]: Services include Podscope (launched 2005), SnapStream (2007), and others (Critical Mention, Volicon, and Digital Nirvana); see Kastrenakes, Jacob. "Fox News stops TV recording services that let journalists search for clips." *The Verge*, Jan 21, 2019. <https://www.theverge.com/2019/1/21/18191652/fox-news-tveyes-settlement-tv-recording-monitoring-service-fair-use>

Clips: *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, 11 Aug. 2011 [Megyn Kelly on maternity leave segment]

*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, 28 Jun. 2011 [Fox alleges anti-Cain racism segment]

*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, 1 Aug. 2011 [Obama debt deal segment]

*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, 18 Aug. 2011 [Class warfare segment]

...to the point that in 2011, Jon Stewart was already suggesting that the supercut was played-out as a technique.

Clip: *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, 27 Jan. 2011 [Bill O'Reilly and Nazi analogies segment]

[Clip audio: Jon Stewart: "So we did the usual crap, a bunch of clips, Fox hosts using Nazi comparisons on their political opponents, the head of Fox News calling political opponents Nazis, someone doing it actually on Megyn Kelly's program to Megyn Kelly, uh-vey-uh... point taken, good time had by all. And the symbiotic cycle of cable life continues."]

But all the same, his successors in late-night comedy kept upping the ante...

Clip: *Corporate Consolidation* (Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO), 25 Sep. 2017) [00wQYmvfhn4]

[Clip audio: Hillary Clinton: "Small business is the backbone of the American economy." / Sarah Palin: "Small businesses are the backbone of this nation's economy." / Rep. Marlin Stutzman and Sen. Richard Blumenthal in split-screen, synchronized: "Small businesses are the backbone of our economy." / Barack Obama and George W. Bush in split-screen, synchronized: "Small businesses are the backbone—" / Four Congresspeople in a 2x2 grid, synchronized: "Small businesses are the backbone of our economy" / Eight Congresspeople in a 2x4 grid, synchronized: "Small businesses are the backbone of our economy" / Sixteen Congresspeople, in a 4x4 grid, synchronized: "Small business is the backbone of our economy."]

...while the form of course proliferated on mainstream news outlets.

Clips: *All the times President Trump praised WikiLeaks* (CBS News, 13 Apr. 2019) [QAglS7m6Kmg]  
*How Donald Trump spoke about WikiLeaks during 2016 presidential campaign* (Guardian News, 11 Apr. 2019) [7n7VyHbqkas]

*Keilar: Trump doesn't know WikiLeaks? Roll the tape.* (CNN, Apr 11, 2019) [a7uZKxIsC-Y]

*Opinion | Where's the love for WikiLeaks now, President Trump?* (Washington Post, 11 Apr. 2019)

[Zl\_XXiK3tCU]

*Trump's WikiLeaks Amnesia* (Mother Jones, 11 Apr. 2019) [x7gF357NR8o]

*Trump offers no opinion on WikiLeaks or Assange* (Fox News, 11 Apr. 2019) [lhxPnqhooJM]



Now, what do I mean by this—What is the difference between archive-thinking and database-thinking? Historically, there is no unambiguous line between the archive and the database, but I'd like to propose the following philosophical contrasts to distinguish the two as competing modes of knowledge:

Text on screen: ["Archive" written on top of left half of screen, "Database" written on top of right half of screen, with vertical line going down the middle]

So, an archive collects works, whereas a database collections information.

That is, an archive collects to preserve, and thus it collects items according to their perceived importance. A database, by contrast, ingests and amasses. A surveillance technology like a license plate reader doesn't consider who's driving the car before it takes the picture.

An archive reveres its objects (at least to some degree) as aesthetically important or carrying history.

The importance of an archive has everything to do with what is in it. Like a reliquary. A database has no reverence for its data. The value of a database has everything to do with how much data is in it; how complete the data is, like a concordance.

An archive tends to be a physical place with physical documents, works, objects. The archive believes in the aura. So if an archive burns, its contents are irreplaceable. Even if they were all photographed or scanned, that loss is still palpable. By contrast, a database contains data, which never had an aura to begin with. And since these data are backed-up, the destruction of any hard drive is unimportant; it's just a minor inconvenience.

An archive is watched over by an archivist, whose role is to protect the various objects within it.

Contemporary databases are watched over by algorithms, and they don't protect; they just collect. Your search history, your site visits, your banking transactions, your likes, your clicks. This information swells to the point where only a machine can watch over it.

The archive is, in essence, a humanist project, or at least it aspires to be. The contents of an archive are worth preserving because they might edify human beings. The database, by contrast, is a capitalist project. The contents of a database are valued to the extent that they can be algorithmically instrumentalized to create profit models or means of social control.

Text on screen: [on the "Archive" side, each line appears as the corresponding phrase is read]

Collects works  
Preserves  
Reverence for its contents  
What-ness is valued  
(aims to be selective, like a reliquary)  
Contents have an "aura"  
Objects are irreplaceable  
Archivist protects  
Quasi-humanist project

[on the "Database" side, each line appears as the corresponding phrase is read]

Collects information  
Ingests  
No reverence necessary  
Much-ness is valued  
(aims to be exhaustive, like a concordance)  
Contents never had an "aura"  
Data are backed up  
Algorithms amass  
Capitalist project

Text on screen [footnote appears]: Here's a longer footnote to suggest another layer to the archive vs. database distinction. Foucault's discussion of the limits of what counts as the work of an author in "What is an Author?" delineates the limits of the archival project quite well. He writes, "Even when an individual has been accepted as an author, we must still ask whether everything that he wrote, said, or left behind is part of his work. The problem is both theoretical and technical. When undertaking the publication of Nietzsche's works, for example, where should one stop? Surely everything must be published, but what is 'everything'? Everything that Nietzsche himself published, certainly. And what about the rough drafts for his works? Obviously. The plans for his aphorisms? Yes. The deleted passages and the notes at the bottom of the page? Yes. What if, within a workbook filled with aphorisms, one finds a reference, the notation of a meeting or an address, or a laundry list: Is it a work, or not? Why not? And so on, ad infinitum. How can one define a work amid the millions of traces left by someone after his death?" (Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?" in Rabinow, Paul, Ed. *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, pp. 103-104.) My point in quoting this here is that where the archive trails off, the database picks up. That "ad infinitum" Foucault mentions, comprising every action, including speech and writing, that can be detected and converted in a datapoint, is the realm of the database. In a literal sense, the banality of everything from the grocery list (Amazon) to the footstep (FitBit) is precisely what databases amass.

Over the last century or so, the epistemes of archive and database waged a dialectical struggle that resulted in the database's victory as the ascendant cultural paradigm of knowledge. The process by which the database episteme overtook the archival episteme recalls the struggle between reproducible artworks and artworks with an aura that Walter Benjamin famously described in 1936. He wrote, "Around 1900, technological reproduction not only had reached a standard that permitted it to reproduce all known works of art, profoundly modifying their effect, but it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes."

Text on screen: "Around 1900, technological reproduction not only had reached a standard that permitted it to reproduce all known works of art, profoundly modifying their effect, but it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes."

Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Ed. Jennings, Michael W., Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin. Trans. Jephcott, Edmund, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, et al. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008, p. 21.

When technologies of reproduction – in particular, photography, lithography, sound recording, and motion picture film – encountered traditional artforms like painting and music, they transformed the cultural meaning of those works by allowing copies of them to be distributed to nearly anyone at low cost. But meanwhile, these technologies of reproduction, especially film, established new art forms, like cinema, based entirely around their mass-reproducibility.

Text on screen: [on upper left, "technological reproducibility" appears, and from it branch two arrows toward the right, one pointing toward "changed all existing art," the other pointing toward "provided the basis for new art."]

An almost identical two-pronged thesis applies in the case of the archive and the database. Firstly, technologies of digitization made it possible to convert everything that was already archived – old films, videos, newspapers, and so on – into data. Reels of film became billions or trillions of bits on digital storage media. OCR software converted pictures of text into searchable text. IMDb users categorized films by genre and keywords. And along the way, the rise of the database episteme also encouraged people to *think of* films increasingly as data, an important ideological shift for the rise of the supercut.

Text on screen: [on lower left, "database technologies" appears, and from it an arrow points right and slightly up, toward the phrase "converted archives into data."]

[footnote] As Manovich explains, “In the 1990’s, when the new role of the computer as a Universal Media Machine became apparent, already computerized societies went into a digitizing craze. All existing books and videotapes, photographs, and audio recordings started to be fed into computers at an ever-increasing rate... ‘Everything is being collected: culture, asteroids, DNA patterns, credit records, telephone conversations; it doesn't matter’” (Manovich 224). The potent promise of the database prompted hordes of people to do prodigious labor reorganizing reality around its logic: “The computer age brought with it a new cultural algorithm: reality --> media -> data --> database. The rise of the Web, this gigantic and always changing data corpus, gave millions of people a new hobby or profession—data indexing” (224-225).]

But secondly, and more importantly for society at large, the rise of the database didn’t stop at conversion; it also entailed vast new forms of data *creation*.

Text on screen: [another arrow appears, branching from “database technologies,” pointing right and slightly down, toward “created new forms of data.”]

This data creation includes the actions of surveilling governments and any information industry, like telecom or banking, plus all internet companies, which are essentially data companies. The databases of these various organizations transforms everyday life into a matrix of datapoints. For example: A play/pause cl—

Animation: in the middle of the word “click,” the video appears to pause, then, after a moment, play again

—ick on a video was not data until Netflix began to record and ingest every time you click play or pause into its database, for the purpose of modeling user interest in order to create funding algorithms.

So, what does it mean, and what does it look like, when film history, which was once an archive of works, gets swallowed up by the database, to be turned into data and treated as data? How does this ideological shift express itself aesthetically? Here, I’d like to offer four sets of examples that chronicle this complex shift.

Text on screen: *How does the rise of the database express itself aesthetically?*

First, let’s consider another documentary subgenre that employs archival footage: the movie-business documentary.

Clips: *Directed by John Ford* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1971)

*Marlene* (Maximilian Schell, 1984)

*The Man You Loved To Hate* (Patrick Montgomery, 1979)

*The Spencer Tracy Legacy: A Tribute by Katharine Hepburn* (David Heeley, 1986)

Some fawningly chronicled the careers of directors or stars, others attempted a more general history of cinema or of a particular genre, and still others were obvious ploys to wring a few bucks out of the studio’s vaults. But across decades, the archival formula remained dominant: a narrator guided the viewer through a series of film clips, one at a time.

Clip: scene from *The Cameraman* (Edward Sedgwick, Buster Keaton, 1928) as presented with new music and narration in *The Big Parade of Comedy* (Robert Youngson, 1964)

[Clip audio: Presenter: “When Keaton ran, his whole body appeared in violent motion; all but his head and sad face, which remained in frozen repose. ... ‘I hope I’m not late,’ apologizes Buster. The bewildered policeman is Harry Gribbon, one of Mack Sennett’s original Keystone Cops.”]

Each clip played for the duration of a scene, or at least plenty long enough to allow narrativity to cohere, and often the narrator relied on this single clip to support whatever point they were making. Still, as time went by database aesthetics began to creep in: topics narrowed from major studios to minor ones, or from broad genres to niche ones, and the illustrative clips necessarily became more obscure, more specific. The sampled portion of each film tended to shorten in duration.

Images: 12 screenshots showing titles of some of the films quoted in *The Republic Pictures Story* (Len Morris, 1991)

12 screenshots showing titles of some of the films quoted in *Dinosaur Movies* (Donald F. Glut, 1993)

12 screenshots showing titles of some of the films quoted in *Hollywood* (Kevin Brownlow, David Gill, 1980)  
[various episodes]

Faster-paced montages began to appear, but they tended to illustrate only superficial patterns, as in this montage of Douglas Fairbanks stunt work, or this montage of B-movie adventure traps.

Clips: *Hollywood*, Ep. 5: Hazards of the Game (Kevin Brownlow, David Gill, 1980)

*The Republic Pictures Story* (Len Morris, 1991)

One notable early instance of some depth is this montage of surrogate images for sex from Saul J. Turell’s *The Love Goddesses* (1965). He tacks it on at the end of the film, as if realizing that this database-patterning of footage didn’t quite fit into the archival approach of the film up to that point.

Clip: *The Love Goddesses* (Saul J. Turell, 1965)

Thus, the slow shift from archive aesthetics to database aesthetics is marked by: narrower topics and more specific patterns; montages with more clips from more sources; montages with shorter clips, often cutting away the narrative context (that is to say, supercutters usually cut ‘down to the bone’ and tend not to retain edits from the source material); and montages that are less canonical or curated and more representative or cross-sectional (that is, montages that pull from high and low, famous and obscure equally, and thus get a better sense of “what the tradition was really about,” as Berger might say).

Text on screen: From archive aesthetics to database aesthetics

Narrower topics and more specific patterns

More clips from more sources

Shorter clips (more “down-to-the-bone” cutting)

Less canonical or curated and more cross-sectional

Comparing how compilation films from different eras treat similar topics helps to trace these shifts: From Marlon Riggs’s 20-second montage of racist screen stereotypes in *Color Adjustment* (1991) to Spike Lee’s 3-minute montage of the same in *Bamboozled* (2000); from Dara Birnbaum’s brief montages of a few Wonder Woman spins to YouTube compilations of every Wonder Woman spin; or from Birnbaum’s brief loop of gestures in *Hollywood Squares* to Catherine Ross’s 4-minute catalog of gestures from *The Price is Right*; from nonspecific collections of images of an actor to compilations of a specific actor’s trademarks; and from Guy Sherwin and other structural filmmakers’ free play with countdown leader and other film detritus to Morgan Fisher’s careful archiving of such fragments in *Standard Gauge*.

In the same year, Muntadas offered an archive of VHS end-credit sequences, which gave way a decade later to Keith Sanborn's list of FBI warning designs.

Clips: *Color Adjustment* (Marlon Riggs, 1991)

*Bamboozled* (Spike Lee, 2000)

*Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (Dara Birnbaum, 1978)

*Wonder Woman Spins! - First Season* (olsolino, 10 Sep. 2007) [Z-O2etMo\_Yw]

*Kiss the Girls, Make them Cry* (Dara Birnbaum, 1979)

*Fingering and Footing* (Catherine Ross, 2005)

*Myrna Loy: So Nice To Come Home* (Richard Schickel, 1991)

*Kramer's Entrance* (Tyler Creviston, 18 Apr. 2009) [XXSGV5wEv1o]

*At The Academy* (Guy Sherwin, 1974)

*Standard Gauge* (Morgan Fisher, 1984)

*Credits* (Antonio Muntadas, 1984)

*The Artwork in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility by Walter Benjamin as told to Keith Sanborn* (Keith Sanborn, 1996)

Gradual shifts like these are even discernable within the work of single director. As an example, let's take a look at Alan Berliner. Early in Berliner's career, he made a handful of compilation films that seem designed to test the semic plasticity of other people's footage. In *Myth in the Electric Age* (1981), he followed a text from Marshall McLuhan, plumbing the archive for archetype. In *Everywhere at Once* (1985), he pushed free association toward a kind of limit, simultaneously reveling in the immensity of experience while implying an anxiety over an archive swelling past manageability.

Clips: *Myth in The Electric Age* (Alan Berliner, 1981)

*Everywhere at Once* (Alan Berliner, 1985)

To make his first feature film, *The Family Album* (1988), he collected "hundreds of hours" (Berliner n.d.) of mostly anonymous home movie footage from "60 different American families" (PBS n.d.), which he arranged into something like the ultimate home movie. By sorting his fragments into categories, Berliner identified a common set of techniques of self-representation that characterize home-movie production. In a way, he resolves the structures of archive and myth by demonstrating that all home movies are the same, even though they aren't. Like Loader and Rafferty's work in *The Atomic Café*, Berliner's rough cataloguing of patterns crucially anticipates the modern supercut.

Clip: *The Family Album* (Alan Berliner, 1988)

Text on screen: \*[http://www.alanberliner.com/first\\_cousin.php?pag\\_id=37](http://www.alanberliner.com/first_cousin.php?pag_id=37)

\*\*<https://www.pbs.org/pov/thefamilyalbum/>

PBS n.d., *POV: The Family Album*, viewed 13 December 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/pov/thefamilyalbum/>

Berliner, A n.d., *The Family Album*, viewed 13 December 2002,

[http://www.alanberliner.com/first\\_cousin.php?pag\\_id=37](http://www.alanberliner.com/first_cousin.php?pag_id=37)

In later projects *Intimate Stranger* and *Nobody's Business*, investigations into his own family's past often took the form of a database, as when he sorted the archive of material left behind by his grandfather Joseph Cassuto into a number of mini-databases: photographs, stamps, envelopes, views of Mt. Fuji.

Clip: 6 clips from *Intimate Stranger* (Alan Berliner, 1991)

His 2006 film *Wide Awake* features a number of YouTube-style supercuts, including one of alarm clocks that beat Marclay to the punch, albeit on a smaller scale, by four years.

Clip: 2 clips from *Wide Awake* (Alan Berliner, 2006)

Even in other recent projects where archive footage plays a smaller role or does not appear at all, the database impulse serves as a primary organizing force. For his 2001 film *The Sweetest Sound*, he invited every person he could find that shared the name Alan Berliner to dinner...

Clip: 3 clips from *The Sweetest Sound* (Alan Berliner, 2001)

[Clip audio: various Alan Berliners in voice-over: "My name is Alain Berliner" / "My name is Alan Berliner" / "My name is Alan Berliner" / "My name is Alan Berliner" / "My name is Alan Berliner" / Alan Berliner, the filmmaker, on camera: "Everyone is Alan Berliner!" The (other) filmmaker Alain Berliner, looking at a room full of people who share his name: "Hello myself!"]

...thus assembling humans as if they were search results. In 2013, he supercut his own footage to chronicle the onset of Alzheimer's in his cousin, the poet and professor Edwin Honig, in a heartbreaking short film.

Clip: *56 Ways of Saying I Don't Remember* (Alan Berliner, 2013), published as an Op-Doc in *The New York Times* [\_Mf3Z8asXB8]

[Clip audio: Edwin Honig: "It's passed by." / "Why do you ask?" / "I don't remember." / "I don't know." / "Let me think." / "I can't remember enough to answer that question." / "The whole thing seems now to be all bundled up..." / "It's hard to explain, I guess." / "I remember what I forgot and I've forgotten what I remember." / "Is that clear?"]

Even the subject matter here reflexively dramatizes the database search – in this case, a person searching their own memory... and tragically coming up empty.

[Clip audio: Edwin Honig: "...zero."]

But the most robust example of the shift from archive to database is how filmmakers have supercut the kiss. From 1929's *Rund um die Liebe*, a compilation of romantic scenes in Weimar films, which contained some kisses, but spread-out over a feature runtime, to Tadanori Yokoo's pop-art montage of comic-book kisses – images that were of course easier to come by than film clips in 1964 – to *That's Entertainment's* (1974) montage of just 4 Clark Gable kisses, to Klaus Vom Bruch's freewheeling half-hour video mashup of movie kisses, plus the rapidfire kiss montages in Chuck Workman's *Precious Images* (1986) and Tornatore's *Cinema Paradiso* (1988).

Clips: clip from *Die Nibelungen, Part I. Siegfried* (Fritz Lang, 1924) that appears in *Rund um die Liebe* (Oskar Kalbus, 1929)

clip from *Faust* (F. W. Murnau, 1926) that appears in *Rund um die Liebe* (Oskar Kalbus, 1929)

clip from *Asphalt* (Joe May, 1929) that appears in *Rund um die Liebe* (Oskar Kalbus, 1929)

*KISS KISS KISS* (Tadanori Yokoo, 1964)

*That's Entertainment!* (Jack Haley, Jr., 1974)

*Relatively Romantic – 1000 Kisses* (Klaus vom Bruch, 1984)

*Precious Images* (Chuck Workman, 1986) [the version shown here is the mid-90's re-release]

*Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988)

All the time we see some combination of clips getting shorter, the montages getting longer, and the images getting harder to find and rarer. After Tornatore, the kiss supercut gets more specific and exhaustive, narrowing to just James Bond kisses or just Kirsten Dunst kisses. And then, the genre cycle enters something of a revisionist period, with a montage of just gay kisses and a montage of people not-quite-kissing. Finally, *Final Cut: Ladies and Gentlemen's* (2012) kiss montage directly quoted three kisses from *Cinema Paradiso* (1988) – thus embedding a supercut within another supercut.

Clips: *James* (Katharina Arndt, 2007) [144847649]

*Rabid* (Mike Olenick, 2005)

*Gay Kiss Montage* (Robert Eldredge [robe888], 7 Oct. 2006) [eIZGbTAHRV0]

*Supercut: People in movies never kiss* (Alex Moschina for Slacktory, 27 Aug. 2013) [XSbnQcknfU0]

*Final Cut: Ladies and Gentlemen* (György Pálfi, 2012)

Thus, the transformation from the archival episteme to the database episteme.

But so what? This question dogged me throughout this project. The more I considered it, the more I realized that although the supercut reveals the database episteme as a mode of *knowledge*, it's probably more important to understand the database as a mode of *power*.

Text on screen: So what?

Why does the shift from an archive-culture to a data-culture matter?

The database as a mode of power

There is now hardly a sphere of human activity that has not been converted into data, analyzed, and financialized into a profit model. For example, taking a trip used to be an action. But now, it's a matrix of datapoints. At toll facilities, detectors scan E-ZPass transponders while a camera photographs the car's license plate, which is then machine-read and time-stamped. This automatically debits a prepaid account, which is paired to the user's bank account. One's license plate is attached to a host of *other* personal information, which could be pulled by law enforcement and correlated with countless CCTV feeds. Not to mention that smartphones continually ping cell towers and GPS satellites to transmit real-time position and velocity information. And so, the simple act of just taking a trip is, at every step, turned into a stream of datapoints that can be analyzed and modeled to serve a host of ends. And that's just one example.

Video: sped-up screen recording of: Google Image search results for the query "taking a trip," a Google search for "toll plaza," the Wikipedia entry for "Toll road," linking to the Wikipedia entry for "Transponder," linking to the Wikipedia entry for "E-ZPass," linking to the E-ZPass New York page [<https://www.e-zpassny.com/en/about/plans.shtml>], an FAQ page, and a PDF describing automatic "account replenishment" with a credit card [[https://www.e-zpassny.com/en/about/i\\_guide.pdf](https://www.e-zpassny.com/en/about/i_guide.pdf)], backing up to the Wikipedia entry for "Vehicle registration plate," linking to the Wikipedia entry for "Traffic enforcement camera," linking to the Wikipedia entry for "Automatic number-plate recognition," linking to the Wikipedia entry for "Mass surveillance," then back to link to the Wikipedia entry for "Closed-circuit television," then navigating to the Wikipedia entry for "Cell site," then linking to the Wikipedia entry for "Satellite navigation device," finally linking to the Wikipedia entry for "Global Positioning System."

To consider how we got to this point, it may be necessary to recall the historical relationship between ideology and infrastructure from a different moment of mechanization. In *The Grundrisse*, Marx writes, "once adopted into the production process of capital, ... labour passes through different

metamorphoses, whose culmination is ... an *automatic system of machinery* ... set in motion by an automaton ... so that the workers themselves are cast merely as its conscious linkages.”

Video: POV of walking up to a storage box and digging out The Marx-Engels Reader, from beneath a stack of other books.

Text on screen: “But, once adopted into the production process of capital, the means of labour passes through different metamorphoses, whose culmination is the *machine*, or rather, an *automatic system of machinery* (system of machinery: the *automatic* one is merely its most complete, most adequate form, and alone transforms machinery into a system), set in motion by an automaton, a moving power that moves itself; this automaton consisting of numerous mechanical and intellectual organs, so that the workers themselves are cast merely as its conscious linkages.”

Marx, Karl. The *Grundrisse*. In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, edited by Robert C. Tucker, W. W. Norton & Co., 1978 [1858], pp. 278-279.

The process of history that Marx explains here and elsewhere is not that dehumanization results from automation, but rather that dehumanization results from capitalism, and the final form of that dehumanization is automation. Put another way, when capitalism takes over a precapitalist mode of production, it begins by treating the workers as machines. From this treatment, a general ideology of mechanization takes hold, eventually culminating in a system where workers no longer use tools to do work, but vast new systems of machines use workers as their appendages.

Clips: *Landbrug i Danmark* [Agriculture in Denmark] (Nordisk Films Kompagni, 1907)

*The Cry of the Children* (George O. Nichols, 1912)

*Westinghouse Works, Panorama View Street Car Motor Room* (Billy Bitzer, 1904)

*Alfred Butterworth and Sons, Glebe Mills, Hollinwood* (Mitchell and Kenyon, 1901)

*Whitsuntide Fair at Preston* (Mitchell and Kenyon, 1906)

David Harvey puts it this way:

Clip: *Reading Marx's 'Capital' Volume 1 with David Harvey*, Part 8 (The People's Forum NYC, 2 Apr. 2019) [A5fmaYfFkRw] (1:07)

Text on screen: “So instead of technology leading the transition from feudalism into capitalism, the technology is the final moment where capital actually comes to be itself.”

[Clip audio, David Harvey: “So instead of technology leading the transition from feudalism into capitalism, the technology is the final moment where capital actually comes to be itself.”]

The ideology comes first, and the technology comes after, reifying it. For this project, I’m most interested in that gap between the arrival of the ideology and the arrival of the technology.

Text on screen: [“ideology” on the left, “technology” on the right with a space between them, marked with a kind of horizontal bracket]

Database-operations are, by definition, machine activities. Thus, supercuts, even before they were invented, were always-already, *structurally*, computer-tasks. But when the database episteme inflamed us with this essentially computational mode of desire – you know, to make supercuts – no one had yet developed the technology to automate supercut production.

Text on screen: [“database episteme” and “the idea to make supercuts” appear on left, beneath “ideology.” “computer-tasks” and “a machine to make supercuts” appear on right, beneath “technology.”]

So humans made them. We simulated computer-operations.

Text on screen: ["we simulated computer operations by making supercuts ourselves" descends from top center, filling in the gap between "ideology" and "technology"]

In a way, it's the "same as it ever was." Ever since Wolfgang von Kempelen's Mechanical Turk, a sculpture that its inventor claimed was a chess-playing automaton, but was really a box with a human chess player inside, people have had quite a history of doing our best to simulate mechanical processes that have yet to be invented.

Image: 1784 illustration of Wolfgang von Kempelen's Mechanical Turk, via Tom Standage [Available at: <https://twitter.com/tomstandage/status/1039230780462047232>]

Standage, T 2018, Twitter update, 10 September, viewed 13 December 2020, <https://twitter.com/tomstandage/status/1039230780462047232>

Jathan Sadowski calls this "Potemkin AI." And these days, it's everywhere: in content moderation, surveillance, tech support, telemarketing: systems are being designed to look like AI while masking that they're actually being run by human workers.

Image: title, subtitle, byline, and cover image for Sadowski's article "Potemkin AI."

Text on screen: "We can call this way of building and presenting such systems – whether analog automatons or digital software – Potemkin AI. There is a long list of services that purport to be powered by sophisticated software, but actually rely on humans acting like robots. Autonomous vehicles use remote-driving and human drivers disguised as seats to hide their Potemkin AI. App developers for email-based services like personalized ads, price comparisons, and automated travel-itinerary planners use humans to read private emails. A service that converted voicemails into text, SpinVox, was accused of using humans and not machines to transcribe audio. Facebook's much vaunted personal assistant, M, relied on humans — until, that is, it shut down the service this year to focus on other AI projects. The list of Potemkin AI continues to grow with every cycle of VC investment."

Sadowski, Jathan. "Potemkin AI." *Real Life Mag*, 6 Aug. 2018. Available at: <https://reallifemag.com/potemkin-ai/> [Last accessed 9 December 2020]

Chief among these technologies is Amazon's Mechanical Turk, a microtask platform that almost villainously lampshades exactly what's going on *in its name* as a means of deflecting justified charges of worker exploitation. Sadowski characterizes Amazon Mechanical Turk as "a dehumanized labor platform [that] provides cheap 'intelligence,' while buying time for innovation to finally arrive." There are two important ideas here: 1) that being forced to imitate a machine is dehumanizing, and 2) that these imitations of machines happen once ideology declares that a machine should "already" be able to do it, and we're waiting for this innovation "to finally arrive." In this case, the driver of technological change is not an idle desire for some new invention; rather, it's an ideology furious that the world hasn't already reshaped itself to what the ideology says it should be.

Text on screen: "a dehumanized labor platform [that] provides cheap 'intelligence,' while buying time for innovation to finally arrive."

Sadowski, Jathan. "Potemkin AI." *Real Life Mag*, 6 Aug. 2018. <https://reallifemag.com/potemkin-ai/>

Video: sped-up screen recording of: Google search for "Amazon Mechanical Turk," linking to Amazon Mechanical Turk homepage [<https://www.mturk.com/>], scrolling down, returning to Google search results, and then visiting these articles:

Samuels, Alana. "The Internet is Enabling a New Kind of Poorly-Paid Hell." *The Atlantic*, 23 Jan. 2018, Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2018/01/amazon-mechanical-turk/551192/>

Newman, Andy. "I Found Work on an Amazon Website. I Made 97 Cents an Hour." *The New York Times*, 15 Nov. 2019, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/15/nyregion/amazon-mechanical-turk.html>

Cushing, Ellen. "Amazon Mechanical Turk: The Digital Sweatshop." *Utne Reader*, Jan/Feb 2013, Available at: <https://www.utne.com/science-and-technology/amazon-mechanical-turk-zm0z13jfzlin>

Mehrotra, Dhruv. "Horror Stories from Inside Amazon's Mechanical Turk." *Gizmodo*, 28 Jan. 2020, Available at: <https://gizmodo.com/horror-stories-from-inside-amazons-mechanical-turk-1840878041>

Treating humans like machines until the machines arrive is precisely the M.O. of capitalism. Once capitalism thinks of the worker as a machine and tries to maximize profit-extraction through Taylorism, surveillance, longer hours, keeping wages flat, incentives, threats... the only way for innovation to go is to replace them with an actual machine.

Video: screen recording of viewing the YouTube videos:

*Fast Workers 2019 #2 - Amazing Skills Level God* (United Pictures, 16 Apr. 2019) [gDU\_vcCKvAo]

*Fast Workers 2019 #9 - Amazing Skills Level Master* (United Pictures, 26 Sep. 2019) [StqflkPn\_IA]

*Fast Workers 2019 #4 - Amazing Skills Level God* (United Pictures, 18 May 2019) [svlV8unPEzc]

And this is just as much a phenomenon in the arts as it is in a factory. Before the invention of photography, its prehistory was marked by camera obscuras, camera lucidas, and other tools designed to help project 3D space onto a flat picture plane. Before viable color cinematography, the Pathé company employed as many as 200 young women to hand-paint color onto films, frame by frame. Before free apps could detect and track the movement of an onscreen object and composite another element on top of it in real time, VFX artists sometimes had to do it frame by frame, by hand.

Images: Albrecht Durer, *Underweysung der Messung*, 2nd ed., 1538

Johann II of Bavaria and Hieronymus Rodler, *A Fine, Useful Booklet on the Art of Measuring*, 1531

Cornelius Varley, *Artist Sketching with a Wollaston Camera Lucida*, 1830

Johann Kaspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, engraving of Lavater's Silhouette Machine, c. 1780

"Colorists at the Pathé lab in Paris," in *Moving Pictures: How They Are Made and Worked* (1912), reproduced in Yumibe, Joshua. "French Film Colorists." *Women Film Pioneers Project*, edited by Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta, Columbia University Libraries, 2013, Available at: <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/essay/french-film-colorists/>

Clips: *Fantasia of Color in Early Cinema* book (Eye Filmmuseum, 2 Jun. 2015) [5StnH0p9k-E]

*Star Wars Featurette: The Birth of the Lightsaber* (Star Wars, 9 Apr. 2014) [RlEjf6dOhnM]

Even now, we still do many things by hand, albeit with a lot of tools. I put this supercut together by hand, but that process involved thousands of queries to Google, YouTube, Vimeo, IMDb, university libraries, and some other places to track down articles, images, video clips, and more. But I also had to perform video search with my own eyes. I want to emphasize that last part. I watched and scanned through many dozens of nightly news broadcasts on YouTube, often at double speed. I did the same or similar for every film I could find with a Slavko Vorkapich montage, every city symphony I could track down; I even spent the better part of a summer dipping at least a toe into every single video on Ubuweb, looking for supercuts or ancestors of supercuts that other authors hadn't mentioned. And I found a lot. And I showed them to you. And it was gratifying to do so.

Video: screen recording of visits to the Video Data Bank entry for *Kiss the Girls, Make them Cry* (Dara Birnbaum, 1979) [<https://vdb.org/titles/kiss-girls-make-them-cry>], a Vimeo search for "Precious Images," a search

for “jay leyda films beget films” at Missouri S&T’s Curtis Laws Wilson Library [<https://library.mst.edu>] that returned no results, linking to the Mobius search page for the same [<https://merlin.lib.umsystem.edu/search~S5/?searchtype=Y&searchscope=5&searcharg=jay+leyda+films+beget+films>], a YouTube search for “abc world news tonight 1975,” linking to a video titled *CBS Evening News open – 1975-04-03* posted by btm0815ma on 15 Feb. 2016 [x6SiWqa\_7Uk], the IMDb page for editor Slavko Vorkapich [<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0903465/>], scrolling down to his credits, and a Google search for “ubu web,” linking to UbuWeb: Film & Video [<https://ubu.com/film/index.html>] and scrolling the long list of creators, eventually clicking on “Claude Closky” to watch *200 Mouths to Feed* (Claude Closky, 1994) [[https://ubu.com/film/closky\\_mouths.html](https://ubu.com/film/closky_mouths.html)].

But while I was doing that, private companies and university researchers were busy pioneering Content-Based-Video-Retrieval systems, or CBVR. The goal of CBVR is to use advanced neural networks to recognize and catalog the contents of a video in order to make them searchable. Every year at the TRECVID conference, teams meet to run benchmark tests on their machines. Progress has been slow, but over time, a video search engine keeps getting closer to reality. And thinking about that, I realize that one day, all the work I did on this video essay might be superseded by a computer. One day it may be possible to feed server-fuls of movies into a CBVR system and have it identify when found footage is grouped into a matching list. At this point, it’s tempting to think of such a future as being inevitable.

Images from: Ansari, Aasif, and Muzammil H. Mohammed. “Content based video retrieval systems- methods, techniques, trends and challenges.” *International Journal of Computer Applications* 112.7 (2015).

Iqbal, S., Qureshi, A.N., Lodhi, A.M., “Content Based Video Retrieval Using Convolutional Neural Network.” In: Arai K., Kapoor S., Bhatia R. (eds) *Intelligent Systems and Applications. IntelliSys 2018. Advances in Intelligent Systems and Computing*, vol 868. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-01054-6\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-01054-6_12)

Y. Jin, J. K. wak, Y. Lee, J. Yun, H. Ko -- Intelligent Signal Processing Laboratory, Korea University. "KU-ISPL TRECVID 2018 VTT Model." [https://www-nlpir.nist.gov/projects/tvpubs/tv18.slides/ku\\_ispl.vtt.slides.pdf](https://www-nlpir.nist.gov/projects/tvpubs/tv18.slides/ku_ispl.vtt.slides.pdf)

I. Soboroff, A. Butt, K. Curtis, A. Ellis, D. Dimmick, J. Fiscus, Y. Lee, A. godil D. Joy, A. Delgado -- National Institute of Standards and Technology. "TREC Video Retrieval Evaluation (TRECVID) Introduction." <https://www-nlpir.nist.gov/projects/tvpubs/tv.pubs.18.org.html>.

G. Quénot -- Laboratoire d'Informatique de Grenoble, G. Awad -- NIST, Dakota Consulting, Inc.. "TRECVID 2018 Ad-hoc Video Search Task." <https://www-nlpir.nist.gov/projects/tvpubs/tv18.slides/tv18.av.s.slides.pdf>.

D. Francis, B. Huet, B. Merialdo -- Data Science Department, EURECOM, Sophia Antipolis, France. "EURECOM participation in TrecVid VTT 2018." <https://www-nlpir.nist.gov/projects/tvpubs/tv18.papers/eurecom.pdf>.

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But as Sadowski and many others constantly try to remind me, no future is inevitable.

Image: title, subtitle, byline, cover image, and final paragraph of Sadowski, Jathan. "Potemkin AI." *Real Life Mag*, 6 Aug. 2018. <https://reallifemag.com/potemkin-ai/>

That said, false belief in AI functions as a tool of power. Sadowski gives the example of China, where state officials would like the public to believe that various surveillance systems are fully automated, as a mask for the fact that fallible humans still mind the cameras and make mistakes. A state that desires omnipotent control would want to present their surveillance AI as having god-like omniscience – even if, perhaps *especially* if, no AI is yet so powerful. If the public agrees to believe, then that belief becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Remember that by *treating* the worker as a machine, we apply an ideological accelerant to their *literal* mechanization. Similarly, by believing in the infallibility of AI, we teleologically enshrine that it *must* become so.

Image: title, cover image, byline, and selected paragraphs from Mozur, Paul. "Inside China's Dystopian Dreams: A.I., Shame and Lots of Cameras." *The New York Times*, 8 July 2018, Available at <https://nytimes.com/2018/07/08/business/china-surveillance-technology.html>.

And the supercut is not innocent here. Long before anybody was working on Content-Based-Video-Retrieval, the supercut and its forerunners were already helping to normalize the database episteme. And like any database-form, the supercut carries that myth of infallibility.

Images: Editor Elizaveta Svilova with shelves of film reels; screenshot from *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929)

Production still of Buster Keaton on the set of *Sherlock, Jr.* (Keaton, 1924); a deleted scene where Buster looks at a shelf of film reels while holding scissors (hosted at Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences 2012, Inside the Booth – A Journey Through Projection, available at: <https://www.oscars.org/videos-photos/inside-booth-journey-through-projection> [accessed on 22 December 2020].)

In homage to Bazin, I want to call this myth “The Myth of Total Database.” If, as Andre Bazin once wrote, the invention of cinema represented an aspiration to create perfect, immersive, lossless, enveloping records of reality, then perhaps it could be argued that the *supercut* represents an aspiration to perfectly convert and master those records as data. If we believe that the supercut as a form has achieved even the tiniest part of this hallucinatory aspiration, then we also believe a corollary myth: the myth that supercuts are true.

Image: on the left, title and two paragraphs from Bazin, Andre. “The Myth of Total Cinema.” *What is Cinema?*, Vol. 1, edited and translated by Hugh Gray, U of California P, 2005 [1967], p. 21.

Text on screen: [on the right, “The Myth of Total Database” appears. Atop the Bazin paragraphs appears the summary “an aspiration to create perfect, immersive, lossless, enveloping records of reality.” On the right, beneath “The Myth of Total Database” appears “an aspiration to perfectly convert and master those records as data.” On the bottom right half of the screen, “the myth that supercuts are true” appears.]

Wherever a supercut is used as evidence, it implies a representative cross-section of its topic. But of course perfectly capturing film history and eliminating search bias is impossible. Beyond that, not all supercuts are *meant* to be cross-sectional – these, for instance, intentionally assemble examples of uncommon representation in order to resist systemic bigotry.

Clips: *Gay Kiss Montage* (Robert Eldredge [robe888], 7 Oct. 2006) [eIZGbTAHRV0]  
“*The Greatest*” - a multifandom vid of characters of color in recent SF/F/horror, by bironic (closetfan, 26 May 2018) [yIHZd0-sj\_Q]

But some compilations are just straight-up lies, like this YouTube channel that compiles ordinary but extreme weather events to promote some sort of end-times narrative.

Image: playlist for the YouTube channel “WORLD OF SIGNS,” Available at [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDeOH4NU6Cm4FRkx\\_OrHAW18RuVwSPj-h](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDeOH4NU6Cm4FRkx_OrHAW18RuVwSPj-h) [Accessed 30 May 2020].

And in an era of ideological polarization, it should come as no surprise that conservative news would cover the George Floyd protests with footage of looters, while other outlets would focus entirely on police targeting journalists. In each case, the compilation implicitly claims to be representative. CBVR would only make it easier to amass what *looks like* compelling evidence for all sorts of slanted or specious claims about history.

Clips: *Police appear to target journalists as they cover George Floyd protests* (Washington Post, 31 May 2020) [62L523KkT-U]

*Tucker: Our leaders dither as our cities burn (GRAPHIC VIDEO)* (Fox News, 1 Jun. 2020) [3n5\_D59ISjc]

Just as confidence in indexical realism was a myth from the beginning, since, after all, photomanipulation predates cinema, *so also* any confidence in the probative powers of the supercut is a myth, and it has been since before the supercut existed.

Images: on the left, title and two paragraphs from Bazin, Andre. “The Myth of Total Cinema.” *What is Cinema?*, Vol. 1, edited and translated by Hugh Gray, U of California P, 2005 [1967], p. 21.

William H. Mumler (spirit photographer), *Portrait of Robert Bonner*, ca. 1860s, albumen silver print

Unidentified American artist, *Two-Headed Man*, c. 1855, daguerreotype

Edouard Baldus, *Cloister of Saint-Trophime, Arles*, 1851, partly hand-painted paper print composited from 10 separate negatives; in Marien, Mary Warner. *Photography: A Cultural History, 2nd Ed.* Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006. p. 58.

The supercut is not simply an aesthetic choice; it is, like the database, a technology. And like any other technology, it carries both real and false promises – the supercut offers a new mode of knowledge, but it cannot guarantee truth. It also carries both real and false threats – the supercut alters how one studies or even views media, but it won't eliminate the necessity of human knowledge-workers.

Text on screen: [two lines with arrows at both ends intersect to form an X shape. In the four quadrants of the X, the words "false promises," "real promises," "false threats," "real threats" appear.]

As a video essayist, I am at once an academic and to some extent, an artist. So, after all this analysis, I'd like to close with some thoughts for the artists.

Clip: *Nothing* (LJ Frezza, 2014) [88077122]

First, we should never have allowed the database episteme to become a cultural mechanism that uses our labor as its appendages. Industrial film production has already squandered well over a century's worth of so many people's labor on assembly-line nonsense.

Clips: *Normal Appearances* (Penny Lane, 1 Sept. 2017) [232023842]  
*Somewhere only we know* (Jesse McLean, 2009) [13006207]

If moving images can play a part in righting any of the world's wrongs, it can only be if *we* wield *them* as tools, rather than the other way around.

Clip: *The Mashin' of the Christ* (Negativland, 2004)

Just as continuity editing is neither natural nor necessary, but can be questioned and rejected, the supercut is not the only thing that can be done with the database.

Clip: Paul Pfeiffer, *John 3:16*, 2000, gallery video installation

There must be other ways of using the database to awaken or to liberate, or at least to create cinema that is thoughtful, poetic, and genuinely delightful. I don't know what future directions there might be in database aesthetics, but I offer the clips playing here as examples of other directions we might have taken.

Clip: *Eyeballing* (Rosalind Nashashibi, 2005)  
*Hide* (Christoph Girardet & Matthias Müller, 2006)

We need to know the past, but we also need to be able to approach our tools with a beginner's mind.

Clips: *A Movie* (Bruce Conner, 1958)  
*A Movie by Jen Proctor* (Jen Proctor, 6 May 2010) [11531028]

Text on screen: by remaking Bruce Conner's *A Movie* (1958), Proctor transforms a "found film" into a "searched film"

For instance, we've seen anti-*narrative* films; but what would an anti-*database* film look like? How many other operations are there besides search and what would they look like on film?

Clip: *Analepsis* (Sean Snyder, 2003-2004)

Text on screen: a series of establishing shots from TV news without context; the viewer is left to guess what they have in common

Or, what if – hear me out – what if you took a video of a ping-pong ball bouncing across a table and essentially rotoscoped it, one frame at a time, with a blizzard of photos of other circular objects? Now, I don't know what the answers to the first two questions are, but I can answer the last one. It would look like this...

Clip: *Echopraxia* (Fu Pok Yan, 2005)

and it's amazing.

Text on screen: A video essay by Max Tohline

Thank you very much.

Text on screen [end credits]:

My thanks to

Open Screens Journal  
<https://openscreensjournal.com/>

ubu  
ear  
freewaves

The Museum of the Moving Image  
<http://www.movingimage.us/exhibitions/2013/06/29/detail/cut-up/>

The Block Museum of Art's Feminist History of the Supercut

Jonathan McIntosh  
Miklos Kiss

Michael Cowan  
Malte Hagener  
Joel Westerdale

The George Eastman Museum  
The German Federal Archives

Agnès Varda  
Jay Leyda

Patrick Gamez  
Zee Hayes  
Philippe Theophanidis  
Bumdog Torres  
Joel Dittmer

Keaton Wooden

RareFilms  
WorldsCinema  
SurrealMoviez

Everyone else who helped make this project possible by lighting my path toward the various objects and ideas herein,

And to Michelle for the steadfast encouragement.

Image: page of a book with transcript of an interview between Louise Bourgeois and Bill Beckley:

BB: You were born in France, but you have lived a long time in the United States. What is the difference between the aesthetics of the two countries?

LB: I'll tell you a story about my mother. When I was a little girl, growing up in France, my mother worked sewing tapestries. Some of the tapestries were exported to America. The only problem was that many of the images on the tapestries were of naked people. My mother's job was to cut out the, what do you call it?

BB: The genitals?

LB: Yes, the genitals of the men and women, and replace these parts with pictures of flowers so they could be sold to Americans. My mother saved all the pictures of the genitals over the years, and one day she sewed them together as a quilt and then she gave the quilt to me. That's the difference between French and American aesthetics.

Bourgeois, Louise. "Sunday Afternoons: A Conversation and a Remark on Beauty." in Beckley, Bill & David Shapiro, eds. *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics*. New York: Allworth Press, 1998.

Text on screen: The End

Researched, written, and edited by Max Tohline, 2021