The Schizophrenic State Project

War, Media & Appropriation

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Research Statement

The Schizophrenic State Project takes place in a world in which devastating mass media images of war, terror and violence are transmitted to billions of viewers worldwide 24/7. At the same time, sensitivity to the fate of others is eroded by this constant exposure, resulting from the inability for action, as shown by Susan Sontag (2003) and Neil Postman (1985). News items change in a rapid stream of events and topics, both in corporate news broadcast media and online ‘surfing’. Mass media becomes entertainment of sorts, swallowed by an over-saturated world of images.

Since 2001, *The Schizophrenic State Project* extracts, processes and re-contextualises images of violence, suffering and protest from news media, in the form of a series of video works, distributed across the fields of video art and experimental film. The found footage, appropriated from mass media, both TV and the Internet, is processed via digital means, inspired by the situationist tradition of *détournement*, which is the “appropriation of existing media for critical comment” as defined by Guy Debord & Gil J. Wolman (1956). The six video works included in *The Schizophrenic State Project* extend the practice of *détournement* by utilising new filmmaking tools, contemporary thinking and online footage accessibility, to create new forms of critical comment, connecting together media, art and theoretical thought.

Research Questions

The Schizophrenic State Project was initiated in 2000 at the MA in Media Studies program at The New School University in New York, under the supervision of Professor Paul Ryan and covers 14 years of mass media study and video work creation. This period spreads from the emergence of MiniDV video technology to the extensive YouTube online distribution of the 2010s, during which the following research questions were formed:

1. How can artistic processing of news footage of violence, suffering and confrontation, illuminate the cognitive and emotive effects of the consumption of these electronically transmitted images?
2. What are the realistic and surrealistic aspects of this experience? Do these images function as a mask or a revealer of the reality they document? Or maybe they do both? The works aim to capture this complexity.
3. In light of new digital tools and ways of distribution, how can these video works provoke new thought, discussion and consciousness of the content of news media images, their nature and their impact?

In *The Schizophrenic State Project*, I use a combination of footage sources and processing techniques, to deal with my own sets of themes and thoughts. The video works composing the project include mass media footage from my place of birth; Israel, Palestine and the region. The focus is on intense political and violent events, often involving elements of clashes, conflicts and

paradoxes, both in content and form. The main core of the work is the idea of people caught in in-between situations, in limbo, where being passive or active is both dangerous and impossible. Following that, the viewing experience of the works provides conflicting stimulations as well, creating a dissonance between pleasure and horror.

“There is one thing the photograph must contain, the humanity of the moment”

(Robert Frank)

The project aims to extract the humanness inherent in the images, highlighting the horror of violence suffered by real people, and at the same time emphasise video as a medium in which these images are delivered to us, encouraging a possibility for action.

It is a long-term research, forming unique experiences in the shape of video works merging content and texture, dealing with aesthetics, technology and humanism.

The term ‘Schizophrenic State’, the title of the project and the first work was inspired by Gregory Bateson’s book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972). It does not refer to the medical condition of Schizophrenia, but to a state of mind, to a condition of the double bind, which is “relating to conflicting or inconsistent elements; characterised by unusual disparity” (Dictionary.com). And as Paul Gibney points out, the “essential hypothesis of the double bind theory is that the ‘victim’—the person who becomes psychotically unwell—finds him or herself in a communicational matrix, in which messages contradict each other, the contradiction is not able to be communicated on and the unwell person is not able to leave the field of interaction” (2006, p. 50). The term ‘schizophrenic state’ refers here both to mode (in cognitive terms) and a country (the state of Israel).

Regarding cognition, in Bateson words, we perceive the world by rubbing our retina against it. How can I distinguish between what is real and what is not? Our eye works like a photographic camera. So when I rub my retina against the electrons shot at me through the TV screen or when I rub my retina against the light coming from the “real” images, it is hard to know the difference, leading to kind of ‘schizophrenic state’ (a double bind).

In terms of state as country, as mentioned, the focus is on the Israeli-Palestinian and Middle-Eastern context, coming from my own background, deriving from my own history of experiencing wars, terror bombings and resistance against oppressing regime. But the works refer also to a larger scope, of global violent conflicts, resistance and activism, human perception and the function of media.

Gregory Bateson’s Cybernetics theories, systematic thinking and ecological perception of the mind, inspired the composition of the video works in a way of patterns – patterns represented by images, patterns as aggregates of differences, and patterns of patterns. Through this process of appropriating images from mass media, and reorganising them, the works retaliate back to mainstream media, closing what Bateson called ‘feedback circuits’.

Context

The following are six artists, out of many, inspiring the project: Bruce Conner and his pioneering work ‘Crossroads’ (1976) which is composed from multiple shots from different angles of a single

nuclear test explosion. Harun Farocki's innovative and clever use of found footage in his vast work, in innovative and clever ways, showing the highly charged political footage from new perspectives, and raising questions regarding human issues. Nam-June Paik's ground-breaking analogue video synthesisers work that opened the door to video manipulation; especially inspiring is his use of magnets to distort the image of Richard Nixon, the US president at the time. Stan Brakhage is the master of film manipulation, highly influential in his poetic filmmaking. Dara Birenbaum's work *Technology/Transformation* (1978-79) which made a genius early use of footage from the TV show *Wonder Woman* to overturn the commercial TV product to a feminist critique. The British George Barber, a pioneer and a member of Scratch Video in the 1980s – his witty use of TV footage in the form of an experimental music video shows how video art can be both fun and thought provoking, as continued in his work today. And there are many more inspirations, such as Derek Jarman's 'The Last of England', Chris Marker's 'Sans Soleil', Errol Morris' 'Fast, Cheap & Out of Control', Adam Curtis' documentaries, Dziga Vertov's 'Man with a Movie Camera', and early short surrealist films such as Man Ray's work, and 'An Andalusian Dog' by Bunuel and Dali.

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Methods

My background is in Film & TV (BA, Tel-Aviv University) and in Media Studies (MA, The New

School For Social Research NYC), and my disciplinary fields are media studies, moving image research, and video post-production. Following my theoretical, technical and creative interests, I use mass media news images and personal footage as the building blocks for creating the video works. The work is as that of a writer using existing words to tell a story, or a sculptor collecting earth materials to assemble works. The same way words are part of language and rocks are part of our landscape, mass media is part of our immediate environment. This approach can be exemplified in William S. Burroughs's literary Cut-Up technique and in Robert Rauchenberg's and Andy Warhol's news pictures appropriation. The mixing of found footage with personal footage adds tension, coming from the linking of 'daily life' to the 'big picture', highlighting the contrast between routine and drama, bringing out hidden anxieties.

In the project, found-footage video images are chosen when they resonate issues that seem important and urgent, linked to history, identity and anxiety, and when they stand out aesthetically. They are often 'poor images', as Hito Steyrel defined them – low resolution, glitchy and noisy video images – captured from the Internet in its early streaming video days, or intentionally degraded, thus functioning in subversive ways. Hito Steyrel brings forth the 'Third Cinema manifesto, For an Imperfect Cinema' by Juan Garca Espinosa (Cuba, late 1960s): 'Imperfect cinema is one that strives to overcome the divisions of labor within class society. It merges art with life and science, blurring the distinction between consumer and producer, audience and author' (Hito Steyrel, 2009).

The processing of the footage in the video works involves diverse techniques such as animation (rotoscoping), sound re-working, image distortion, montage editing, speed manipulation, datamoshing, dramatisation, ridicule and more. It highlights the artificiality of the images, but at the same time makes them faultier and therefore more fragile, directing attention to the filmed subject, promoting empathy and reflection. The processing takes place not only spatially but also temporally, as the videos often progress from abstraction to clearer context.

'Recycled images call attention to themselves as images, as products of the image-producing industries of film and television, and therefore as pieces of the vast and intricate mosaic of information, entertainment, and persuasion that constitute the media saturated environment of modern, or many would say, postmodern life'

(William C. Wees, *Recycled Images. The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films*. 1993, p. 32)

The works in *The Schizophrenic State Project* often offer interesting relations between content and form, creating a third dimension of contradiction composed from aesthetic pleasure and horrified reaction. It refers also to consumer culture nature of media, and challenges conceptions of enjoyment and entertainment. This is the 'schizophrenic state' – the pleasure of watching video is irresistible, working directly on our deep mechanisms of sensuality, while on the other hand video is also a useful information source. So the project is located directly on the junction of basic human tendencies, new technological tools and moral consciousness, bringing forward both pain and beauty, through an aesthetic form composed from light and coded through technology.

As Marco Scotini writes in his essay 'The Government of Time and the Insurrections of Memories': 'The task of these new video, film & digital images is that of revealing the mediated nature of history. On the one hand, they show that which the corporate media, as the central agents of political authoritarianism, hides or removes from view. On the other they re-appropriate themselves of the violent expropriation of experience: producing history, therefore, making it visible'. (Scotoni, M & Galasso, E (eds), *Politics of Memory, Documentary and Archive*, 2015).

Outcomes

The project addresses a blind spot within the field of contemporary art, evaluating the way in which video art subsumes and homogenises local complexities and reinforces dominant ideologies in the process of post-production. New media and recent transformations of the Internet have opened access to a global diversity of film and video production, including mainstream films, documentaries, news, reportage, amateur productions and YouTube broadcasts. Together with the move to digital production this has developed a seemingly limitless resource for video art. *The Schizophrenic State Project* tries to connect this 'meta-media society' (Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 2001) and video art by a series of video works, distributed into the public arena.

The works are stages in a search for video forms that address these urgent questions:

The first work 'Schizophrenic State' (2001-3, 5'25'', USA/Israel) was a sort of a 'Big Bang' for the rest of the project. It contains many elements which appear later in other works. It begins with two tragic images: an Israeli soldier being lynched in Ramallah and a Palestinian boy called Muhammad AL-Dura, and his father, being fired at in Gaza. The work, made while living in New York City, then continues in a string of images and sounds, sourced both from TV and Internet found footage and personal MiniDV recordings, de-constructing image and language, challenging them as tools for human expression in the face of horror.

<https://vimeo.com/17736663>

In the next work, 'beach' (2006, 4'55'', Israel), a flickering TV transmission shows still pictures of a happy family on a beach, as 100 km away a girl runs frantically on a bombed beach in Gaza. The girl's horror gradually becomes more present, and a growing impact of shock and horror is created. The work examines the fine line between tranquillity and chaos and challenges perceptions of reality and media.

<https://vimeo.com/17702918>

'Re:Commandments' (2007, 5'00'', Israel) intensifies the critique of war, nationalism & tradition, mixing hard-core techno music, the 1955 movie 'The Ten Commandments', international TV news broadcasts of Israel-Hezbollah war in Lebanon, and a video documentation of a belly dancer in the desert. The work becomes a hectic montage of Middle East representations, addressing fetishisation of war and religion in Western media. Interesting contradictions and connections are made, highlighting the absurdity and tragedy of this collision of conceptions.

<https://vimeo.com/31542660>

A search for delivering ideas in an essence, in the most minimal effective way, materialised in 'Excerpt' (2008, 4'35'', Israel). It picks one short clip from a flow of online news videos showing a family hiding behind a wall in a neighbourhood in Beirut, Lebanon, that has become a war-zone. The short compressed video is slowed down, enlarged, and receives a new soundscape, revealing additional dimensions in the scene. The image is transformed into a psychedelic landscape, creating a troubling contrast between imagery and content, leading to an uneasy affect: anxiety deconstructed into pixels.

<https://vimeo.com/17539684>

In 'Disturbdance' (2012, 3'25'', UK), there is a step forward from portraying victims, to showing activists. In the West Bank, a young woman is blocking two armed Israeli soldiers from firing at protesters. The image, taken from a TV news report found online, is digitally processed and slowed down, and the original soundtrack is replaced by lyrical music. The soldiers and the girl get caught in a romantic dance of both suspicion and empathy.

<https://vimeo.com/36596277>

Lastly, 'Cut Out' (2014, 4'19', UK) portrays a radiant, raging, 11 year old Ahed Tamimi, punching the empty space in front of her. A computer algorithm roughly cuts Tamimi out of the surroundings, struggling to contain her, while the target of anger are rubbed off the screen. Gradually, more fragments of the scene are revealed, and the context is made clearer. The processing of a 2012 video found on YouTube, highlights the documented scene as an image, both of a fight for freedom and a media event.

'Guli Silberstein's excellent Cut Out, meanwhile, took a YouTube-sourced video of a young girl involved in some form of direct action protest and isolated the subject using an algorithm that slowly revealed the full context of the clip. As the perspective widened, what looked initially like a film about the oppressive nature of media gradually became a film about the way media can liberate and protect people in dangerous situations.' (Alistair Harkness, The Scotsman newspaper, 18.4.16)

<https://vimeo.com/98203800>

Dissemination

The work is mostly independent, not relying on outside funding sources, made in a personal process, with the videos becoming public after being fully completed. The video works were continuously presented in hundreds of festivals and art venues in the UK and worldwide, including Alchemy Moving Image Festival Scotland, Transmediale Berlin Germany, Go Short the Netherlands, Un Festival C'est Trop Court Nice France, Jihlava International Documentary Festival Czech Republic, Festival of (In)appropriation Los Angeles USA, and the National Centre of Contemporary Art Moscow Russia. Attending the festivals, screenings and exhibitions and talking about the works, is another important part of the process, including receiving and giving feedback, via Q&A, chats and written reviews. The project also exists online on the artist website and other publications.

The six works composing *The Schizophrenic State Project* were launched as one body of work on January 2017 on Doc Alliance online portal. The project was presented in academic conferences at

Bath SPA University, University of Portsmouth and the Royal Academy of Art, with more coming up in the future.

Impact

The work is a reflection on issues of war, violence, and media, and studies aesthetics as a tool for improving our media environment. Art broadens the imagination and is a mirror to history as it happens. The work strives to increase empathy and humanness that seem to be disappearing in a post-fact world of clashing truths and ‘fake news’. The project shows mass media news images in a new light, taking images out of the superfluous bombardment of images, connecting us to their human aspect. This promotes new thoughts, emotions and possibly action. The festival and exhibition curators that select the works to be shown, help to distribute this approach and promote video work which is political and relevant on the one hand, and advances the aesthetic language of video art and experimental film on the other hand.

Tahl Kaminer, a senior lecturer in The University of Edinburgh, sums it up: ‘Guli Silberstein’s videos typically include use of effects which distort the image, placing a veil of sorts between the viewer and the content. This causes a distantiation or estrangement, the terms used by Brecht and Schklovsky, a tactic they identified as a producer of critical cognition. It produces a critical distance by estranging familiar situations and requiring a process of deciphering. The ‘covering’ via effect of the specifics, the releasing of only partial information, which are the key to the estrangement, also demonstrate what Benjamin liked so much in Brecht: using technique to produce an aesthetic experience in the audience, which is also a process of critique and gradual revelation, and hence the work manages to be both aesthetically valuable and have a political stance. It does not have to ‘say’ what its (political, moral) position is; rather, the audience’s experience it.’